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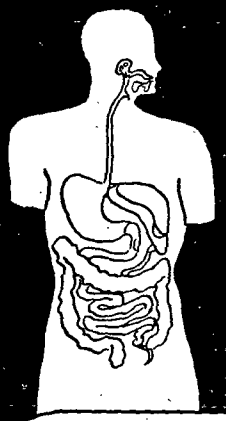

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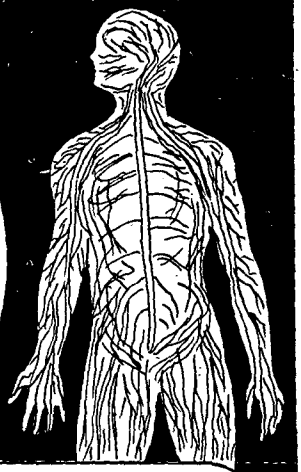

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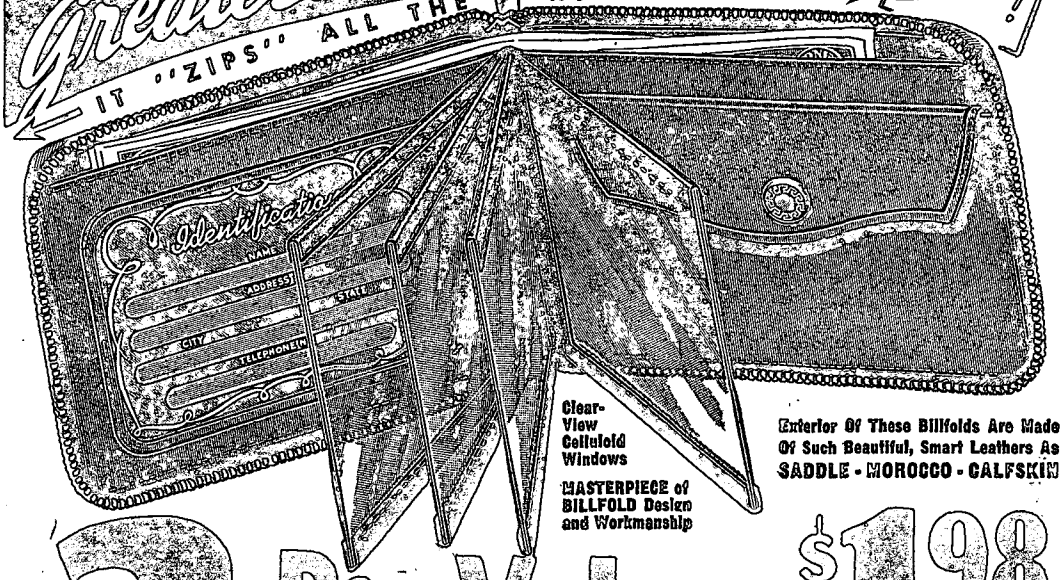

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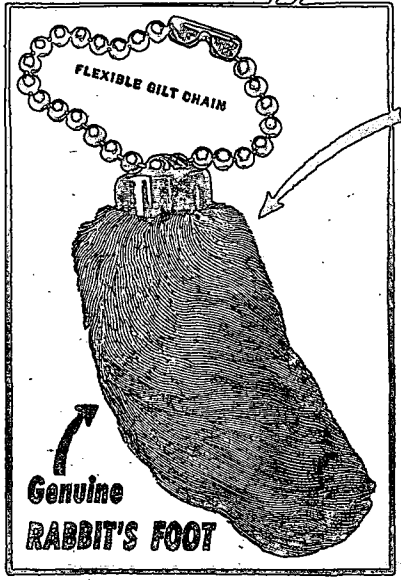

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Vol. 13, No. 2 CONTENTS March, 1946

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Far from civilization, Brian Raft and Parror, the cat-man, grapple in a fight to the finish—while a breathless girl looks on and the destiny of a race totters in the balance! 13

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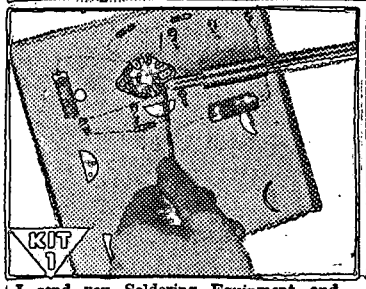

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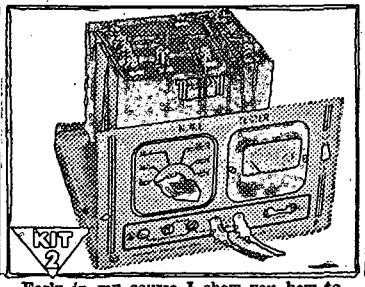
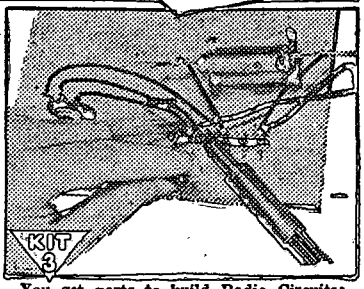


Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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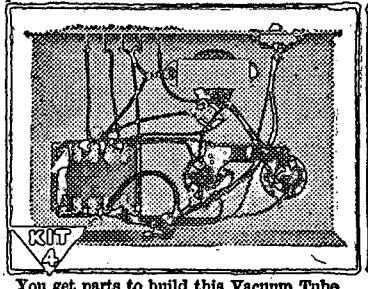

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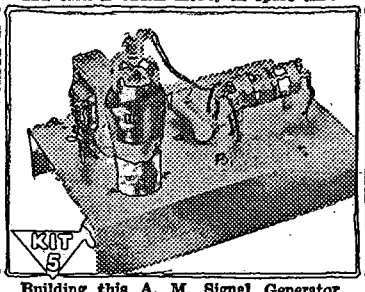

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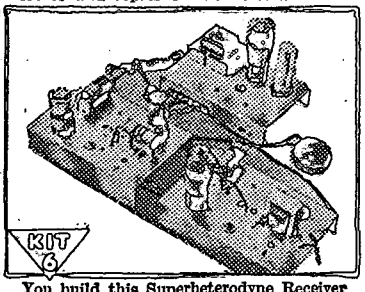

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ROLL out the Sarge, Frogeyes—no, roll out the Xeno and let the Sarge alone. On top of his other troubles, he is now forced to inflict himself half again as often on the various kiwis, pee-lots and astrogators who trouble to hurl brickbats at his bloody but unbowed pate. Yes, starting next issue STARTLING STORIES will be a bi-monthly and will emerge from the presses six times a year instead of four.

Do you think they can take it, Wart-ears? Do you think *we* can take it?

Time alone can tell.

Speaking of brickbats, the appropriately surnamed Sam Mason, publisher of Count Wacula, who describes himself as "late of Philly" (too bad he wasn't a lot later) has penned the following insulting screed along with the even more insulting diagram of ye Sarge.

Ready the ray-guns, Snaggie old tooth, we're going to tee off on this one.

HASTEN, HASTEN, GET THE MASON!

By Sam Mason

Dear Sargie: This is the first time I have ever written to a promag—maybe it will be the last. I am writing now to ask you, in a dignified way, whether the gag will be kept up much longer.

What gag? You, my friend, you. You and your Wart-ears and your Kiwis and your Frogeyes. . . . Yah. And your review of fmzs. Yahyah. No, we don't mean the knock you gave Count Wacula—you're entitled to your opinions. But why kick the young hardworking fen who're trying to make their fmzs worth while, like certain poor eggs you gave the Bronx huzza to in your Fmz Review column?

Another thing—why'n blazes don't you answer a straight question? When someone cites one of the horrible errors that blaze from every page, do try to answer sanely instead of yelling "pass the Xeno." It was funny—ONCE. Perhaps if you'd listen to a few criticisms the mag might become a little more adult, and a little less like a comicbook. Belive it or not, Sarge, your readers are growing up.

Incidentally, why can't the characters talk like humans? They sound like Victorian Heeros and Heeroines, with a stilted book talk that could only come out of a tired typewriter. And furthermore, why not use your heads, and stop insisting that the cities of the future will be stainless steel monsters, huge, gruesome and sterile.

But I can't go 'way without a few flowers to sooth the bruises. Sarge, you *were* good enough to treat the mag TOWARD TOMORROW well in your review of it. Any mag that's trying to break down sapheaded, prejudiced, Unamerican notions is on my good books.

Also, on page 57 of the Fall ish, there was a good drawing, badly printed and unsigned. The rest of the art was foul, including the cover. What's the matter, didn't your one good Bergey cover go over with the morons?—*217 Thompson Street, New York, N. Y.*

Well, Wart-ears, it is nice to be taken for a major menace—even by brother Mason. As for Xeno, this benighted earthling, who has apparently never entangled himself in its ambrosial fumes, simply doesn't understand. The stuff is *habit-forming*—and so darned convenient. Give him the juice, Snaggie, and let him rest in pieces.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THAT great star of English stf, Polton Cross, is back with one of his most brilliant stories, OTHER EYES WATCHING. In it, he describes the adventures of a trio of humans who, by a combination of luck and enterprise, actually succeed in crossing the deadline of the Fourth Dimension.

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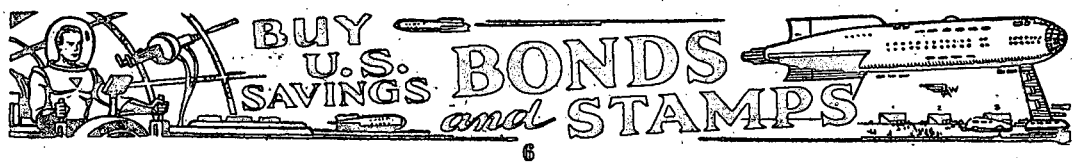
(Continued on page 8)



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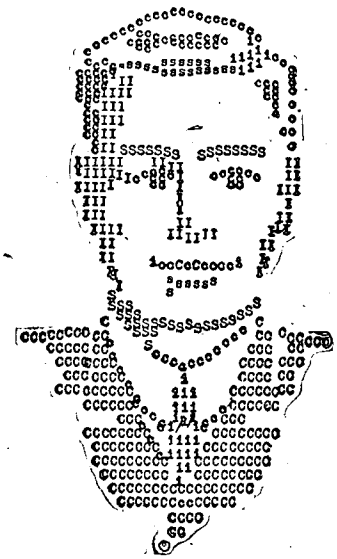

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

ther than human frailty—which is present at all times. You should truly enjoy this one.

Backing it up for the Hall of Fame special is one of the finest of all science fiction yarns—THE DIMENSION OF CHANCE, by Clark Ashton Smith. Enough said as to the story, but it will also serve to introduce an artist about whose work ye Sarge has been screaming his head off for months—L. Sterne Stevens, who can make even the fabulous Finlay look to his laurels. Watch for it.

ETHERGRAMS

HAVING done our obsequious best for the issue that lies ahead, ye Sarge will now don his crash helmet and risk the hazards of the mail box. Put on your Tellurian gas mask, Frogeyes, before you unfasten the padlock. You never know what's coming out of that Department-of-the-Interior atom bomb.

Ye great Gods of the Pleiades! It's *poetry!*

BEM BALLAD

By Lin Carter

Ahoy Sarge! Stand by to assist boarders. I see the good ships, T.W.S. and S.S. are still flying, but the good ship C.F. has crashed. That's too bad. I hope she'll soon be repaired and flying again.

Due to the condition of yer covers, I am hereby beginning a one-man (?) crusade against the eternal triangle of guy, gal and ghoul or if you prefer Bum, BEM and Belle.

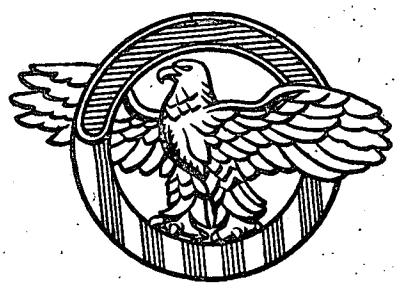
To wit, I have written a poem, yes (kerhem) a poem—

BEMs on the cover
Nothing ever new,
Half-nude girl and lover
In a space-suit too.

Pretty girl is screeching,
Hero's raying,
Monster is reaching,
Editor's paying.

(Continued on page 10)

RECOGNIZE THIS EMBLEM!



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*J. M., San Juan, P. R.

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 8)

My dear sir, no buts!
This has got to stop!
Are yer cover artists nuts?
Your covers are a flop.

Your BEMs are disgusting—
They don't sell yer mag,
As at this poem I take a fling
Yer covers kinda sag.

A hero in a space-suit
Wielding a ray-gun,
You must think it's very cute
I think it's overdone.

And then there's the gals
(Most of them are screaming)
They're not my idea of pals,
In such scanty screening.

You're in a rut, man,
Whatcha gonna do?
I'm just a common fan
So it's up to you.

Bergey and Belarski,
They are on the beam,
A new cover plotski
Is every good fan's dream.

That's all I've got to say,
Unless I see another BEM,
And on that future day
I'll be on your neck again.

The end.

And now to the Winter S.S.:

OUTLAW WORLD:
By Edmond Hamilton.
At last, the answer to every pee-lots dream, a Cap. Future novel by Ed. Hamilton. SWELL!

SHORTS:
Fair. The best was "The Forgotten Man of Space."

DEPARTMENTS:
So-so. "The Worlds of Tomorrow" is swell, and you've got one of the two best Letter Departments. You haven't had a BEM for three issues—let's keep it that way—huh?

So long till next time, Sarge!—*865 20th Ave. So., St. Petersburg, Fla.*

Grulzak, grulzak, little BEM
Grasping madly for the femme,
Why don't you turn to gentler uses,
And set your bombs with orchid fuses?

Pare down your claws and paint them pink,
And pour your dandruff down the sink,
Or better yet, my word upon it,
Sit down and write the girls a sonnet!

Which should if only as a starter,
Really take care of Kiwi Carter,
Get out the cards and deal some Keno
Or rather, Wart-ears, pour the Xeno!

BRONX CHEER

By Irwin Friedman

Dear Sarge: Oh well, here we go again. Having nothing whatever to do, I thought of writing to you. One of these days, I'll do it (Figure that out for yourself. I can't).

After getting all of that nothing out of the way, let's get to the Winter S.S. First, the cover. You know, Sarge, I think it would be better if you *didn't have a cover on SS.* It would solve many problems, such as—

1-6, None of those monstrosities.
7, Trimmed edges.
8, Save paper.
9, Etc.

Or, you could at least put the front cover on the

(Continued on page 98)

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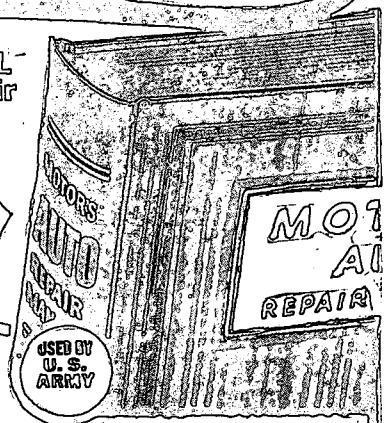

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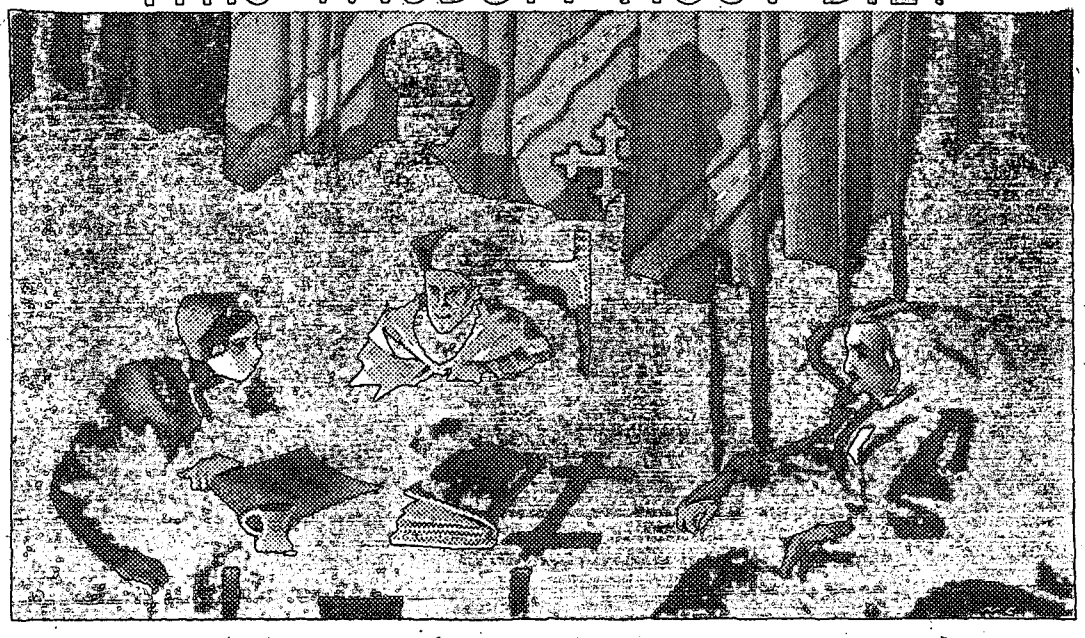

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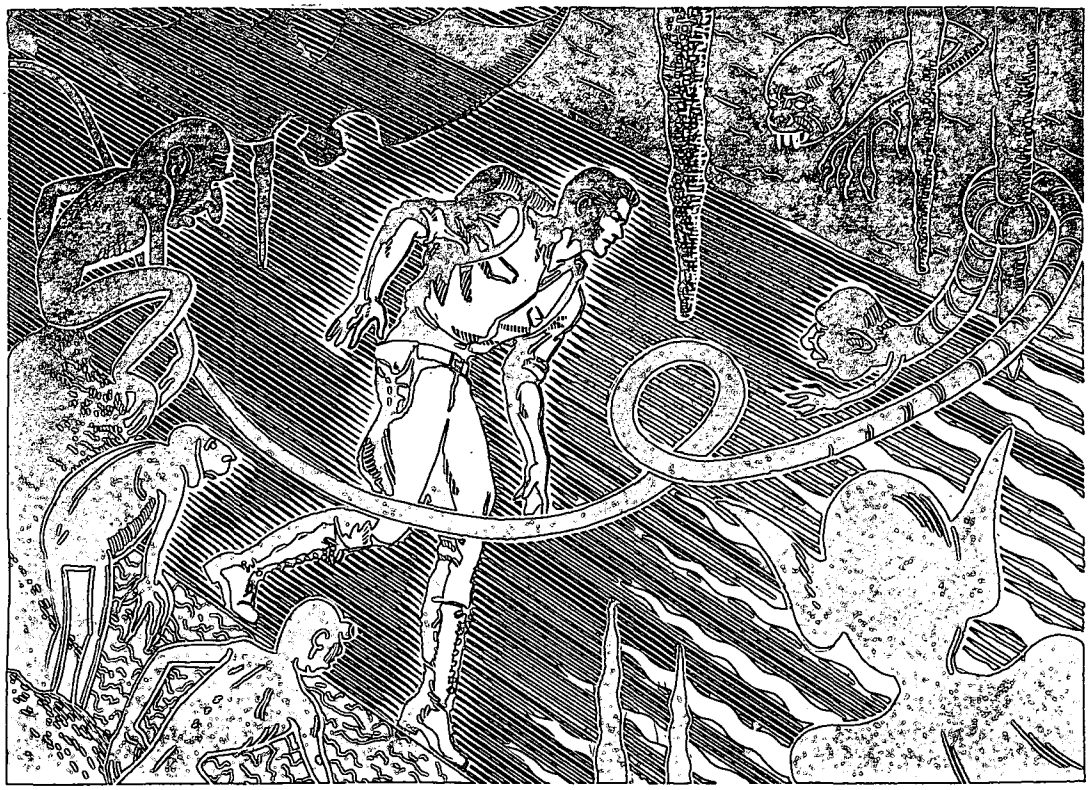

Cautiously Raft crossed the airy bridge while, about him and far down in the depths of that awesome place, moved the devils of Paititi, menacing and alert (CHAP. III)

VALLEY OF THE FLAME

By KEITH HAMMOND

Far from civilization, Brian Raft and Parror, the catman, grapple in a fight to the finish—while a breathless girl looks on and the destiny of a race totters in the balance!

CHAPTER I

Face of a Girl

FAR OFF in the jungle an animal screamed. A river-moth flapped against the screen, nearly as large as a fruit-bat. And very far away, subsensory, almost, Brian Raft could hear the low pulsing of drums. Not unusual, drums on the Jutahy, in the great valley of Amazonas. But these were no signal messages.

Raft wasn't an imaginative man. He left all that to Dan Craddock, with his Welsh ghosts and his shadow-people of the lost centuries. Still, Raft was a doctor, and when those drums throbbed in the jungle something curious happened here in his little hospital of plastic shacks, smelling of antiseptic. Something he couldn't ignore.

AN AMAZING COMPLETE NOVEL

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When a sick man's blood beats in rhythm with the distant drums, slow or fast as the far-off echoes set the pace, a doctor has reason to wonder. . . .

The great moth beat softly against the screen. Craddock bent over a sterilizer, steam clouding up around his white head so that he looked like a necromancer stooping over a cauldron. The drums throbbed on. Raft could feel his own heart answering to their rhythm.

He glanced at Craddock again and tried not to remember what the older man had been telling him about his wild Welsh ancestors and the things they had believed. Sometimes he thought Craddock believed them too, or half believed, at least when he had been drinking.

He'd got to know Craddock pretty well in the months they had worked together, but he realized that even yet he knew only the surface Craddock, that another man entirely lived in abeyance behind the companionable front which the Welshman showed him, a man with memories he never spoke of, and stories he never told.

This experimental station, far up the Jutahy, was a curious contrast, with its asepsis and its plastics and its glitter of new instruments, to the jungle hemming it in. They were on assignment just now to find a specific for atypical malaria.

In the ten years since the end of World War II, nothing yet had been discovered any safer than the old quinine and atabrine treatment, and Raft was sifting the jungle lore now to make sure there might not be some truth in the old Indio knowledge, hidden behind masks of devil-worship and magic.

He had hunted down virus diseases in Tibet, Indo-China, Madagascar, and he had learned to respect much that the witch-doctors knew. Some of their treatments were based on very sound theories.

But he wished the drums would stop. He turned irritably from the window and glanced once more at Craddock, who was humming a Welsh ballad under his breath. A ballad full of wild, skirling music about ghosts and fighting.

CRADDOCK had talked a lot lately—since the drums began—about ghosts and fighting. He said he smelled danger. In the old days in Wales men could always scent trouble in the wind, and they'd drink quarts of uisquebaugh and go out brandishing swords, ready for anything. All Raft could smell was the reek of disinfectant that filled the little hospital.

And all the wind brought to him was the sound of drums.

"In the old days," Craddock said suddenly, looking up from the sterilizer and blinking through steam, "there'd be a whisper in the air from Tralee or Cobh, and we knew the Irish were coming over the water to raid. Or maybe there'd be something from the south, and we'd get ready for the men of Cornwall. But we'd know. We'd know."

"Rot!" Raft said.

"Okay. But I felt something like this once before." Craddock sucked in his breath, a curious look of fright and incredulity on his wrinkled brown face. He turned back to the steam-cloud, and Raft watched him in puzzled wonder.

There was a mystery about Craddock. He was a biologist, and a good one, but for thirty years or more he had hung around the Jutahy country, never venturing farther away than Manaos, living precariously as a sort of jungle general practitioner.

Raft had added him to the party on impulse, since Craddock knew the country and the natives. He hadn't expected too much of the Welshman in the laboratory, for something had happened to Craddock's hands—they were badly maimed. But he was pleasantly disappointed on that score.

Raft watched the mutilated hands working with hypodermics, twisting plunger from tube, deftly pulling the hollow needles free. Craddock had three fingers on one hand, and the other was a claw, with oddly stained and textured skin. He never spoke of what had happened. His injuries didn't look like the scars of acid burns or animal teeth. Still, he was surprisingly deft, even when liquor was heavy on his breath.

It was heavy now, and Raft thought the man must be deliberately timing his motions to the rhythms of the drums. Or perhaps not. Raft himself had to pause consciously and break step with the beat. And some of the sick men in the ward were alive, he thought, solely because the drum-beats would not let their hearts stop pumping.

"A week now," Craddock said, with that rather annoying habit he had of catching another man's thought, or seeming to. "Have you noticed the charts?"

Raft ran a nervous forefinger along the

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As Raft raced forward, Parror balled his fist and struck Janissa hard and clean upon the jaw, sending the girl flying—to crumple motionless upon the glassy floor (CHAP. XIV)

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lean line of his jaw. "That's my job," he grunted.

Craddock sighed.

"You haven't lived in Brazil as long as I have, Brian. It's the things you don't usually notice that count. Up to a week ago, this plague was killing off the Indians fast. The vitality level's gone up a lot in the last seven days."

"Which is crazy," Raft told him. "It's accidental—just a cycle. There's no reason. The drums have nothing to do with it."

"Did I mention drums?"

Raft glared.

Craddock put the hypos in the sterilizer and closed the lid. "The drums aren't talking, though. It's not Western Union. It's just rhythm. And it means something."

"What?"

The Welshman hesitated. His face was in shadow, and his white hair gleamed like a fluffy halo in the overhead light. "I think, maybe, there's a visitor in the forest. I wonder now. Have you ever heard of Curupuri?"

Raft's face was a mask.

"Curupuri? What's that?"

"A name. The natives have been talking about Curupuri. Or maybe you haven't been listening."

"I seem to miss a lot around here," Raft said with heavy irony. "I haven't seen a ghost for months."

"Maybe you will." Craddock turned to stare toward the window. "Thirty years. It's a long time. I—I've heard of Curupuri before, though. I even—"

HE STOPPED, and Raft breathed deeply. He'd heard too, but he didn't want to admit it. Superstition is apt to be psychologically dangerous in the jungle, and Raft knew that Curupuri was a widespread belief among the Indios. He'd encountered it ten years ago, when he was younger and more impressionable. And yet, he thought, it's the only possible god for the Amazon Basin.

For Curupuri was the Unknown. He was the blind, ravening, terrible life-force that the Indios think is the spirit of the jungle. A savage, primeval Pan, lairing in the darkness. But nothing so concrete as Pan.

Curupuri moved along the Amazon as vast and inchoate and yet as tangible as life itself. Here in the jungle one realizes, after a while, that a god of life can be far more terrible than a god of death. The Amazonas is too alive. Too enormous for the mind to comprehend, a great green living thing sprawled across a continent, blind, senseless, ravenously alive.

Yes, Raft could understand why the Indios had personified Curupuri. He could almost see him as they did, a monstrous shapeless creature, neither beast nor man, stirring enormously in the breathing fertility of the jungle.

"The devil with it," Raft said, and drew deeply on his cigarette. It was one of his last cigarettes. He moved to Craddock's side and stared out the window, drawing smoke gratefully into his lungs and savoring the second-hand taste of civilization.

That was all they'd had for a year—second-hand civilization. It wasn't too bad. Madagascar had been worse. But there was quite a contrast between the sleek modern architecture of the home base, the Mallard Pathological Institute overlooking the Hudson, and this plastic-walled collection of shacks, staffed by a few Institute men and some native helpers.

Three white men Raft, Craddock, and Bill Merriday, were here. Merriday was plodding, but a good research pathologist, and the three of them had worked well together.

Now the work was ready to be wound up, and presently Raft knew he'd be in New York again, rushing by air-taxi from roof night-club to club, cramming the excitement of civilization into as short a time as possible. Then a little later, he realized, he'd be feeling a familiar itch again, and would be heading for Tasmania or Ceylon or—somewhere. There were always new jobs to be tackled.

The drums were still throbbing faintly, far off in the dark. After a while Raft left Craddock in the lighted lab and wandered outside, down to the river, trying not to listen to the distant pulse of sound. . . .

A full moon rode up from the Atlantic, brightening the great pleasure-city of Rio, swinging up the Amazon to the backlands, a huge yellow disc against a starry backdrop. But across the Jutahy was the jungle, black towering walls of it, creeping and swarming with a vitality that was incredible even to a scientist. It was the fecund womb of the world.

Hot countries mean growth, but in the Amazonas is growth gone wild. Its rich alluvial soil, washed down for ages along the rivers, is literally alive; the ground beneath your feet moves and stirs with vitality. There

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is something unhealthy about such abnormal rioting life, unhealthy as the flaming Brazilian orchids that batten on rottenness and blaze in the green gloom like goblin corpse-lights. . . .

Raft thought of Craddock. Odd! That inexplicable mixture of incredulity and fear—that Raft thought he sensed in the Welshman was puzzling. There was something else, too. He frowned, trying to analyze a vague shadow, and at length nodded, satisfied. Craddock was repelled by the drums but he was also drawn, attracted by them in some strange way. Well, Craddock had lived in this part of the forest for a long time. He was nearly Indio in many ways.

Something moving out on the surface of the river, sheet-silver under the moon, roused Raft from uncomfortable thoughts. In a moment he could see the outlines of a small boat, and two heads silhouetted against the silvery water. The men were pulling in toward shore and the hospital's lighted window.

"Luiz!" Raft called sharply. "Manoel! Depressa! We've got visitors."

A FEEBLE hail came across the water, and he saw the two outlines slump down, as if the last efforts of exhaustion had brought them to the landing. Then came excitement—the boys running with lights and shouts, everybody who could walk swarming to the doors and windows to watch. Raft helped beach the boat and superintended as the two almost unconscious men were carried up to the hospital.

One of them, he saw, wore an aviator's helmet and clothing; he was beyond speech. The other, a slender, bearded man, rather startlingly graceful even in this extremity, lurched toward the door.

"Senhor, senhor," he murmured, in a soft voice.

Craddock came out to help. He stopped dead still on the threshold, though crowding bodies hid the two arrivals from sight. Raft saw a look of absolute panic come over the Welshman's face. Then Craddock turned and retreated, and there was the nervous clinking of a bottle.

Bill Merriday's stolid, intent features were comfortingly normal by contrast. But as Merriday, bending over the aviator, was stripping off the man's shirt, he suddenly paused.

"I'll be hanged," he said. "I know this chap, Brian. Thomas, wait a minute. I'll have it. Da something . . . Da Fonseca, that's it! I told you about that mapping expedition that flew in a couple of months ago, when you were in the jungle. Da Fonseca was piloting."

"Crack-up," Raft said. "What about the other man?"

Merriday glanced over his shoulder.

"I never saw him before."

The thermometer read eighty-six, far below normal.

"Shock and exhaustion," Raft surmised. "We'll run a stat C.B.C., just in case. Look at his eyes." He pulled back a lid. The pupils were pin-points.

"I'll take a look at the other man," Merriday said, turning. Raft scowled down at da Fonseca, a little uncomfortable, though he could not have said exactly why. Something seemed to have entered the room with the two men, and it was nothing that could be felt tangibly. But it could be sensed.

Frowning, Raft watched Luiz milk a specimen from the patient's finger. The overhead light fell yellow and unsteady on da Fonseca, upon a glitter of sudden brilliance from something that hung on a chain about his neck. Raft had thought it a religious medal, but now he saw that it was a tiny mirror, no larger than a half-dollar. He picked it up.

The glass was convex, lenticular, and made of a dark, bluish material less like glass than plastic. Raft glimpsed the cloudy, shapeless motion of shadows beneath its surface.

A little shock went through him. The mirror did not reflect his face, though he was staring directly into it. Instead he saw turbulent motion, though there was no such motion in the room. He thought of storm-clouds boiling and driving before a gale. He had the curious, inexplicable feeling of something familiar, an impression, an inchoate mental pattern.

Thomas da Fonseca. He caught the extraordinary impression, for a flashing, brilliant moment, that he was looking into da Fonseca's eyes. The—the personality of the man was there, suddenly. It was as though the two men were briefly en rapport.

Yet all Raft saw was the driving, cloudy motion in the mirror.

Then the storm-swirl rifted and was driven apart. From the tiny lens in his hand a vibration ran up the nerves of his arm, striking into his brain. He stared down.

Now that the clouds had cleared away, it

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was not a mirror, but a portrait. A portrait? Then a living portrait, for the face within it moved. . . .

A mirror, after all, then. But no—for that was certainly not his own face that looked back at him out of the small oval.

It was a girl's face, seen against a background of incredible richness and strangeness that vanished as he looked, because she leaned forward as if into the very mirror itself, her head blotting out the remarkable background. And it was no painted picture. She moved, she saw—Raft. He drew his breath in sharply.

THERE was never such a face before. He had no time to see her very clearly, for the whole unbelievable glimpse was gone in an instant. But he would have known her out of a thousand faces if they ever met again.

The look of delicate gayety and wickedness in the small, prim curve of her mouth, the enormous translucent eyes, colored like aquamarines, that looked, for a moment, into his very solemnly above the sweet, malicious, smiling mouth.

There could be no other face like it in the world.

Then the mists rolled between them as they stared. Raft remembered later that he shook the lens passionately in a childish attempt to call her back, shook it as if his own hands could part those clouds again and let him see that brilliantly alive little face, so gay and solemn, so wicked and so sweet.

But she was gone. It had all happened almost between one breath and the next, and he was left standing there staring down at the lens and remembering the tantalizing—oddness—of that face.

An oddness seen too briefly to understand except as something curiously wrong about the girl who had looked into his eyes for one fraction of a second. Her hair had been —odd.

The eyes themselves were almost round, but subtly slanted at the corners, and with a blackness ringing them that was not wholly the black of thick lashes, for a prolonged dark streak had run up from their outer corners a little way, accentuating their slant, and giving a faint Egyptian exoticism to the round, soft, dainty face with its rounded chin. So soft—he remembered that impression clearly. Incredibly soft, she had looked, and fastidious.

And wrong. Racially wrong.

The mirror was blank again, and filled with the trembling fogs. But, very briefly, it had opened upon another world.

CHAPTER II

Drumbeat of Death

LUIZ was staring at Raft in surprise.

"S'nhor?" Luiz said.

"What?" Raft answered.

"Did you speak?"

"No." Raft let the lens fall back on da Fonseca's bare chest.

Merriday was at his side. "The other man won't let me look at him," he said worriedly. "He's stubborn."

"I'll talk to him," Raft said. He went out, trying not to think about that lens, that lovely, impossible face. Subjective, of course, not objective. Hallucination—or self-hypnosis, with the light reflecting in the mirror as a focal point. But he didn't believe that, really.

The bearded man was in Raft's office, examining a row of bottles on a shelf—fetal specimens. He turned and bowed, a faint mockery in his eyes. Raft was impressed; this was no ordinary backwoods wanderer. There was a courtliness about him, and a smooth-knit, muscular grace that gave the impression of fine breeding in both manners and lineage. He had also an air of hardly concealed excitement and a certain hauteur in his poise which Raft did not like.

"Saludades, s'nhor," he said, his too-bright eyes dazzling in the light. Fever, perhaps, behind that brilliant stare. His voice was deep, and he spoke with an odd, plaintive undertone that held a distant familiarity. "I am in your debt."

His Portuguese was faulty, but one didn't notice that. Raft had a feeling of gaucherie, entirely new to him.

"You can pay it right now," he said brusquely. "We don't want the station contaminated, and you may have caught something up-river. Take off your shirt and let's have a look at you."

"I am not ill, *doutor.*"

"You recover fast, then. You were ready to pass out when you came into the hospital."

The black eyes flashed wickedly. Then the man shrugged and slipped out of the ragged shirt. Raft was a little startled at

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the smooth power in his sleek body, the muscles rippling under a skin like brown satin, but rippling very smoothly, so that until he moved you hardly realized they were there.

"I am Paulo da Costa Pereira," said the man. He seemed faintly amused. "I am a garimpeiro."

"A diamond-hunter, eh?" Raft slipped a thermometer between Pereira's lips. "Didn't know they had diamonds around here. I should think you'd be in the Rio Francisco country."

There was no response. Raft used his stethoscope, shook his head and tried again. He checked his findings by Pereira's pulse, but that didn't help much. The man's heart wasn't beating, nor did he apparently have a pulse.

"What the devil!" Raft said, staring. He took out the thermometer and licked dry lips. Da Fonseca's temperature had been below normal but Pereira's was so far above normal that the mercury pushed the glass above 108°, the highest the glass tube could register.

Pereira was wiping his mouth delicately. "I am hungry, *s'nhor,*" he said. "Could you give me some food?"

"I'll give you a glucose injection," Raft said, hesitating a little. "Or—I'm not sure. Your metabolisms haywire. At the rate you're burning up body-fuel, you'll be ill."

"I have always been this way. I am healthy enough."

"Not if your heart isn't beating," Raft said grimly. "I suppose you know that you're—you're impossible? I mean, by rights you shouldn't be alive."

Pereira smiled.

"Perhaps you don't hear my heartbeat. I assure you that its beating."

"If it's that faint, it can't be pumping any blood down your aorta," Raft said. "Something's plenty wrong with you. Lie down on that couch. We'll need ice-packs to bring your temperature down."

Pereira shrugged and obeyed. "I am hungry."

"We'll take care of that. I'll need some of your blood, too."

"No."

Raft swore, his temper and nerves flaring.

As Raft thrust down the cushion, there was a sudden whir, a flash of steel, and a fan of sharp blades leaped out. (CHAP. VII)

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"You're sick. Or don't you know it?"

"Very well," Pereira murmured. "But be quick. I dislike being—handled."

WITH an effort Raft restrained an angry retort. He drew the necessary blood into a test-tube and capped it.

"Dan!" he called. There was no answer.

Where the devil was Craddock?

He summoned Luiz and handed him the test-tube. "Give this to *Doutor* Craddock. I want a stat C.B.C." He turned back to Pereira. "What's the matter with you? Lie back."

But the diamond-hunter was sitting up, his face alive and alight with a wild, excited elation. The jet eyes were enormous. For a second Raft watched that stare. Then the glow went out of Pereira's eyes and he lay back, smiling to himself.

Raft busied himself with ice-bags. "What happened up-river?"

"I don't know," Pereira said, still smiling. "Da Fonseca blundered into my camp one night. I suppose his plane crashed. He couldn't talk much."

"Where you alone?"

"Yes, I was alone."

That was odd, but Raft let it pass. He had other things on his mind—the insane impossibility of a living man whose heart did not beat. Ice-cubes clinked.

"You a Brazilian? You don't talk the lingo too well."

The feverishly brilliant eyes narrowed.

"I have been in the jungle a long time," the man said. "Speaking other tongues. When you do not use a language, you lose it." He nodded toward the bottles on the wall. "Yours, doctor?"

"Yes. Fetal specimens. Embryonic studies. Interested?"

"I know too little to be interested. The jungle is my—my province. Though the sources of life—"

He paused.

Raft waited, but he did not go on. The strange eyes closed.

Raft found that his fingers were shaking as he screwed the tops on the ice-bags.

"That thing da Fonseca wears around his neck," he said, quite softly. "What is it?"

"I had not noticed," Pereira murmured. "I have had a difficult day. If I might rest, it would be nice."

Raft grimaced. He stared down at that cryptic, inhuman figure, remembering the odd malformation of the clavicle he had felt during his examination, remembering other things. Some impulse made him say,

"One last question. What's your race? Your ancestors weren't Portuguese?"

Pereira opened his eyes and showed his teeth in an impatient smile that was near to a snarl.

"Ancestors!" he said irritably. "Forget my ancestors for tonight, doutor. I have come a long way through the jungle, if you must know it. A long, long way, past many interesting sights. Wild beasts, and ruins, and wild men, and the drums were beating all the way." His voice lowered. "I passed your ancestors chattering and scratching themselves in the trees," he said in a purring murmur. "And I passed my ancestors, too." The voice trailed off in an indescribably complacent sound. After a moment of deep silence, he said, "I would like to sleep. May I be alone?"

Raft set his teeth. Delirium, of course. That accounted for the senseless rambling. But that imperious dismissal was intrinsic in the man himself.

Now he gathered his rags about him as if they had been ermine. He seemed to fall asleep almost instantly. From his recumbent form there breathed out a tremendous vitality that set Raft's nerves jangling.

He turned away. A heartbeat so faint that it was imperceptible? Ridiculous. Some new disease, more likely, though its symptoms were contradictory. Pereira seemed in perfect health, and yet he obviously couldn't be.

There might be another answer. A mutation? One of those curious, specialized human beings that appear occasionally in the race? Raft moved his mouth impatiently. He went back to check on the aviator, conscious of a queer, rustling alertness permeating the hospital, as though the coming of the two men had roused the place from sleep to wakefulness.

THERE was no change in da Fonseca, and Merriday was busy with stimulants. Raft grunted approval and went in search of Craddock.

Halfway down the hall he stopped at the sound of a familiar voice. The diamond-hunter's low, smooth tones, urgent now, and commanding.

"I return this to you. I have come very far to do it, *s'nhor*."

And Dan Craddock replying in a stumbl-

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ing whisper that held amazement and fear.

"But you weren't there! There was nothing there, except—"

"We came later," Pereira said. "By the sun and the waters we guessed. Then at last we had the answer."

Raft let out his breath. A board creaked under him. Simultaneously he heard a—a sound, a susurrus of faint wind, and felt a sense of inexplicable motion.

Startled, he hurried forward. The passage lay blankly empty before him. Nothing could have left the laboratory without his knowledge. But when he stood on the threshold he faced Craddock, and Craddock alone, staring in blank, astounded paralysis at nothing.

Quickly Raft searched the room with his eyes. It was empty. The window screens were still in place, and, moreover, were so rusted that they could not be removed without considerable noise.

"Where's Pereira?" he asked curtly.

Craddock turned to face him, jaw slack. "Who?"

"The man you were just talking to."

"I—I—there was nobody here."

"Yeah," Raft said. "So I'm crazy. That wouldn't surprise me, after what's happened already tonight." He noticed a booklet in Craddock's hand, a ring-bound notebook with its leather cover moulded and discolored by age. The Welshman hastily stuffed it into his pocket. Avoiding Raft's probing eyes, he nodded toward the microscope.

"There's the blood. I must have bungled it somehow. It's all wrong." Yet he didn't seem unduly surprised.

Raft put his eye to the lens. His lips tightened.

"So I am crazy," he said.

"It is funny, isn't it?" Craddock said, inadequately.

It was more than funny. It was appalling. The vascular system has certain types of blood cells floating free, of course; they have a definite form and purpose, and intruding organisms may affect them in various ways.

But this specimen on the slide showed something Raft had never seen before. The red cells were oval instead of disc-shaped, and in place of the whites there were ciliated organisms that moved with a writhing, erratic motion.

And moving fast—too fast!

"They've slowed down a lot since I first looked," Craddock said. "In the beginning they were spinning so quickly I couldn't even see them."

"But what sort of bug would do that? It's destroyed the phagocytes. Pereira ought to be dead, if he hasn't a white blood cell in his body. No, there's a mistake somewhere. We'd better run some reagent tests."

They did, going through the routine, but found nothing. To every test they could devise, the reaction was that of apparently normal blood. Furthermore, the writhing ciliate things seemed not to be malignant. When toxic matter was introduced the ciliates formed a barrier of their own hairy bodies, just as phagocytes should have done, but three times as effective.

A specimen slide glittered and trembled in Craddock's mutilated hand.

"It's an improvement," he said. "Those bugs are better than whites."

"But where are the whiter?"

"Deus, how should I know?" Craddock's fingers slid into the pocket where he had placed that discolored notebook. "I'm not in charge here—you are. This is your problem."

"I wonder if it is," Raft said slowly. "Just what was there about the—sun and the waters?"

Craddock hesitated. Then a wry, crooked smile twisted his mouth.

"They appeared quite normal to me," he said. And, turning on his heel, was gone.

RAFT stared after him. What was behind this? Craddock obviously knew Pereira. Though how that interview had been held, Raft did not know. Ventriloquism? He snorted at the thought. No, Pereira had been in the laboratory with Craddock, and then he had, seemingly, walked through solid walls.

Which meant—what?

Raft turned to the microscope again. There was no help there. In the sane, modern world of 1954 there was simply no place for such irrationalities. Incidentally, where was Pereira now?

He wasn't in the office where Raft had left him. And as Raft hesitated on the doorway, he heard a sound that brought blood pumping into his temples. He felt as though the subtle, half-sensed hints of wrongness had suddenly exploded into action.

It was merely the faint pop-popping of exhaust, but there was no reason for the motor launch to be going out at this hour.

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Raft headed for the river. He paused to seize a flashlight. There were faint shouts. Others had caught the sound of the engine too. Merriday's bulky form loomed on the bank.

Raft leveled the light and sent the beam flashing out into that pit of shadows. The smooth surface of the river glinted like a stream of diamonds. He swung the beam.

There was the motor launch, ploughing a black furrow in the shining water as it melted away into the gloom where the flashlight's rays could not penetrate.

But just as it vanished the light caught one full gleam upon a face—Pereira's face, laughing back across his shoulder, white teeth glittering in the velvety beard. Triumph was arrogant in his laughter, the elation Raft had sensed before.

There was someone with him; Raft found it impossible to make out who that someone was. The Indios were running along the cleared bank, and a couple of them had put out in a canoa, but that wouldn't help. Raft drew the pistol he always carried in the jungle. The thought of sending a bullet after that arrogant, laughing face was very pleasant.

"No, Brian!" Merriday said, and pulled down his arm.

"But he's getting away with our boat!"

"Dan Craddock's with him," Merriday said. "Didn't you see?"

The pop-popping of the motor was fainter now, dying into the dim murmur of the Jutahy drums. Raft stood motionless, feeling bewildered and helpless.

"Nothing we can do till morning, anyway," he said presently. "Let's go back inside."

Then a voice he did not know jabbered something in Portuguese.

"He has gone back to his own land—and he has taken something with him."

Raft flashed the light up into the face of the aviator, da Fonseca, his flyer's cap gripped in one hand as he fumbled at his throat, groping, searching. The pupils of his eyes were no longer tiny. They were huge.

"Taken what?" Merriday said.

"My soul," da Fonseca said quite simply.

There was a moment of stillness. And in that pause da Fonseca's words fell with nightmare clarity.

"I had it in a little mirror around my neck. He put it there. It gave him the power to—to—" The thin, breathless voice faded.

"To do what?" Raft asked.

"To make men slaves," the aviator whispered. "As he did with the doutor."

Craddock! Raft had a sudden insane relief that the Welshman had not, then, gone off willingly with Pereira, in some mysterious unfathomed partnership. Then he was furious with himself for instantly accepting such a fantastic an explanation from a man so obviously mad.

Yet it was an explanation. There seemed to be no other.

"Let me down," da Fonseca said, stirring against the hands that held him upright. "Without my soul I cannot stay here long."

"Carry him inside," Raft said. "Bill, get a hypo. Adrenalin."

DA FONSECA had collapsed completely by the time he was laid gently on a cot. His heart had stopped. Merriday came running with a syringe.

He had put on a long needle, guessing Raft's intention.

Raft made the injection directly into the heart muscle. Then he waited, stethoscope ready. He was conscious of something—different. Something changed.

Abruptly he knew what it was. The drums. They were louder, shouting, triumphant. Their beat was like the throbbing of a monster heart—of the jungle's heart, dark and immense.

Da Fonseca responded. Raft heard the soft pounding through the instrument, and those heart-beats were timed exactly to the rhythm of the Jutahy drums. His lids lifted slowly. His voice was hollow, chanting.

"He goes back now—and the gate of Doirada opens to his coming—He goes back—to the sleeping Flame. By the unseen road, where the devils of Paititi watch at the gate of Doirada. . . ."

Louder roared the drums. Louder beat da Fonseca's heart. His voice grew stronger.

"The sun was wrong. And the river was slow—too slow. There was a devil there, under the ice. It was—was—"

He tore again at his throat, gasping for breath. His eyes held madness.

"Curupuri!" he screamed, and the drums crashed an echo.

And were still.

There was silence, blank and empty. As though at a signal, the Jutahy drums had stopped.

Da Fonseca fell back like a dead man on the cot. Raft, sweat cold on his skin, leaned

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forward, searching with his stethoscope at the bared chest.

He heard nothing.

Then, far out in the jungle, a drum muttered once and was still.

Da Fonseca's dead heart stirred with it. And fell silent.

CHAPTER III

Gate to Paititi

WITH five Indios Dr. Brian Raft went up the Jutahy after Craddock and Pereira. He went with his lips thinned grimly, and a deep doubt in his mind. Merriday he left at the base hospital, to wind up the experiment and send the records back to the Institute.

"You can't go alone," Merriday had said. "You're crazy, Brian."

Raft nodded.

"Maybe. But we worked with Dan for nearly a year, and he's a white man. As for Pereira, sometimes I'm not entirely sure that he was a—man."

Stolid Merriday blinked.

"Oh, but that's nonsense."

"I told you what happened. He had no heartbeat. His temperature was crazy. And the way he walked through the laboratory wall wasn't strictly normal, was it?"

"Da Fonseca said some queer things before he died, too. You're not starting to believe them, are you?"

"No," Raft said. "Not yet. Not without a devil of a lot of proof. Just the same, I wish I'd got a chance at that notebook of Craddock's. Pereira said he was returning it. And that stuff about the sun and the river being too slow. Two people mentioned that, you know; da Fonseca and Pereira. Moreover, Dan seemed to understand what it meant."

"More than I do," Merriday grunted. "It's dangerous for you to go up-river alone."

"I've got a hunch Craddock went up-river, a long time ago. What he found there is a mystery." Raft shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't know, Bill. Anyway, they didn't have much fuel aboard, and I think I can catch up with them."

"I wish you'd let me go with you."

But Raft wouldn't agree to that. In the end, he went out alone, the Indios paddling the big canoa untiringly up against the current. He had supplies—what he could get hastily together—and guns and ammunition. The natives helped him find Pereira's track. For, all too soon, the diamond-hunter left the river.

"Two men walking," Luiz said, eyeing the underbrush.

Walking. That meant either that Craddock was going willingly now, or else there was force being employed. Hypnosis, perhaps, Raft thought, remembering the lens-mirror. More and more often now he recalled the exotic, paradoxical face of the girl. How she tied into the mystery he could not guess, but remembrance of her made him more willing to seek out the solution.

So they went westward toward the Ecuadorian border, where a thousand little rivers rise to pour into the great Solimoes that feeds the Amazon itself. Ten days and ten nights they traveled. . . .

On the eleventh morning the Indios were gone, even the faithful Luiz. No sound, no alarm—but Raft was alone when he woke.

[*Turn page*]

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Perhaps they had deserted. Perhaps the jaguars had got them. The beasts had been holding a devil's sabbath in the forest during the night. Raft didn't find any traces.

His lips drew down more grimly, and he went on, slower because tracking was hard work, for another ten days. He pushed on doggedly through the green breathing walls of the silent jungle, which pulsated with invisible life—never sure that the next turn of the way might not bring him face to face with the deadly giboya, or one of the omnipresent jaguars, or Pereira himself.

He could not have done it at all except for the years of rigorous outdoor life and tropical experience. But he kept on his quarry's track.

Then, in the end, he found what the dying da Fonseca had called the unseen road.

The day before, from the height of a crest—he was getting into mountains—he had seen the great valley, an immense horizon-reaching bowl of fertile forest stretching further than his eye could follow. It was an ocean of moving green. But the track led down into it.

There was a roughly circular space down there where the shade of green was different. It must be very large, for it was far away—miles in diameter. Partly it seemed to be cupped between mountains, and Raft caught the flash of a river far off circling around the nearer curve of it. Perhaps fifty miles in diameter, the place was, but distances are deceptive in the forest. He followed the trail, and it led him directly toward that oasis of green within the green.

RAFT had stood the trip well. His face was more deeply seamed, his eyes were red-rimmed, yet he felt little weakness. A sound medical knowledge helped him there. Fevers were rife in this country. Fevers, but no Indios. Animals only, and chiefly the jaguars.

Animals! The place swarmed with life, Raft thought wearily. Everywhere around him was movement, the bright flutter of insects and brilliant birds, the watery gliding of a snake rippling to cover, the smooth, furtive motion of the big cats, the erratic hysteria of tapir or peccary. All about him was the jungle itself, like a vast composite animal, terribly alive.

Then, in a clearing, he saw plainly the tracks he had been following. Craddock's, and the diamond-hunter's. Pereira had been leading. A rare blaze of sunlight glanced down from overhead, picking out the colors of leaf and flower.

At one spot in the green wall Raft saw something curious—an oval tunnel curving away into the matted jungle as if some gigantic serpent had passed this way, pressing the vines and trees aside, flattening the floor, leaving its own shape carved out of the living vegetation. The footprints led across the clearing toward that green tunnel of gloom.

The footprints stopped halfway across the open space.

Instinctively Raft looked up. But there were no trees close enough. With a long sigh he let the pack slide from his shoulder, but he didn't let go of the rifle.

There was a path, he saw now, beginning where the footprints stopped, six feet wide, depressed a little below the surface of the ground.

Odd!

He went forward—and jerked back, startled. Something had touched him. An invisible, cool tangibility that stood unseen here in the quiet air of the glade.

Raft put his hand out cautiously. It was halted in midair. A smooth, glassy, invisible surface. He explored the surface by touch, since sight could not help him. The thing seemed to be a hollow tube, nine or ten feet high—he threw pebbles to test that—and it was made of some perfectly transparent substance, on which not even dust could settle.

As Raft glanced along its unseeable winding length into the jungle he could observe how it pressed the trees aside to make way for it, supporting hanging orchids in midair, stopping the flight of a humming-bird that dashed itself in bewilderment against the solid air.

As he stood there, wondering, the first deep roar of the jaguar echoed through the clearing. Raft whirled, lifting his rifle. He could see the leaves vibrate to that deep-throated sound, but of the jaguar itself he could see nothing.

Yet it must be very near—it must be very large—and it must be on the verge of a charge, Raft decided, listening to the coughing breathing of the great cat.

He was in the open here. Coming to a quick decision, he bent, seized his rucksack, and tossed it behind him into the invisible tunnel. Rifle at the ready, he backed after it, and under his feet the yielding earth gave

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place to something hard and smooth. The great, echoing yell came once more, reverberating strangely from the tunnel walls.

Then something soughed past him. A whispering—dim, distant, fainter than a breath. Before him, like heat-waves in the air, a shimmer swept across the tunnel-mouth.

Instantly all sound ceased. Raft's ears rang with the dead, intense silence. He reached out into empty air, and it was not empty.

Across the mouth of the tube stretched the same glass-smooth barrier that were walls and roof and floor to him. The doorway was closed. The gate—the Gate to Paitita?

A trap? Had Pereira set this snare?

Raft patted the stock of his rifle. All right, a trap, then. But he wasn't exactly unarmed. He'd go ahead, since that had been his intention anyway. Only he would not go it blind. He would be ready.

THERE was no sign of the jaguar. He put the pack on his shoulders and started walking. The footing was smooth, but not slippery. Something seemed to hold his feet down. This wasn't glass. It was, perhaps, a force-field, an invisible screen of pure energy. Da Fonseca had spoken of the unseen road.

Check.

He hiked on, across the clearing, into the forest, not letting himself wonder too much yet. There was plenty to think about. Raft had long ago learned the trick of shutting his mind to thoughts which he was not yet ready to entertain.

He had closed his mind time after time in these twenty days to one recurring vision—the gay, solemn, radiant face of the girl in the mirror, seen impossibly in one glance, and never to be forgotten.

It was not exactly a path. Had Raft not known that he walked in a tunnel, and had it not been for the utter, dead stillness, there would have seemed no reason for alarm. The jungle still rose solid and shadowy about him.

Butterflies fluttered brilliantly past. Birds trailed their fantastic plumage through the leaves. Now and then a cloud of tiny stinging puims blew past outside the stuff that was not glass.

Magellan, very long ago, had written of Brazilian trees that gave soap and glass, distorted versions of the hevea that flows rich latex. There was often truth in legends. The Seven Cities of Cibola—they were real, even though they had never been paved with gold.

Vespucci, Raft recalled from some dark cranny of memory, had mentioned a Lake Doirada, somewhere in the sertão, with shining cities on its banks. And the kingdom of Paititi, that da Fonseca had spoken of. In the old days bands of mamelucos had gone out on more than one expedition to find Paititi.

He could recall only fragmentary scraps. Paititi, where some of the natives were dwarfs and some were giants, some had their feet turned backwards, and other had legs like birds. The usual legendary yarns.

Nobody had ever found Paititi.

Raft got the torch out of his pack. The path had been sinking deeper and deeper below ground level. Now, a few yards ahead, the black depths of a tunnel loomed. The tube was plunging underground. It was impossible to keep one's footing on that breakneck slant, and Raft advanced very cautiously, wondering how Pereira and Craddock had managed it.

The light stabbed out. There was nothing to see but the compressed earth walling him in. The tunnel angled down steeply. Too steeply. Raft realized abruptly that he had gone too far. Something had tricked him, a shifting of balance, a—a warping of gravity, it seemed. For, he realized unmistakably, an unknown force was keeping him upright as a fly keeps its footing on perpendicular walls.

For an instant giddiness made his head swim. This ramp was not perpendicular, of course, but he had no suction cups on his feet. Nevertheless he maintained his balance on a slope of at least forty-five degrees.

Pure energy, he thought. Walls of force!

He went on down, though now he had no way of telling whether he was climbing or descending. Only logic showed that, since it was dark, he was probably going deep into the earth.

Then, after a long time, came a sudden change. Light glowed curiously from around a curve ahead. Dim light, more like a darkness alive with twisting, coiling refractions. Raft went on warily.

It was water.

It went over and around the tunnel in a smooth, swift, glassy current, foam-marbled, perfectly silent, gleaming in the beam of the torch.

Raft thought, The Children of Israel went upon dry land in the midst of the sea, and

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the waters were a wall unto them.

Still another miracle occurred on a journey beginning to be laden with miracles. Raft's jaw set a bit harder. He went ahead, vaguely hoping that what had happened to the Egyptians wouldn't happen to him. If that wall should break, it would be unfortunate.

The wall did not break. He went forward into a long period of blackness, broken only by the light beam. He was, he realized, very far down now. For all he knew he might be descending a completely perpendicular path, the warped gravity of the tunnel making such a fantastic descent possible.

A FAINT glow warned him to switch off the light. Darkness closed in, but it did not last for long. His eyes adjusted themselves to a dim violet glow that seemed to come from all sides, above, below, everywhere. Vertigo made Raft's head spin sickeningly.

Far, far below him, but at an impossible angle, seen slantingly through the transparent floor, was the jagged curve of an immense cavern.

In a moment more logic asserted itself and the vertigo grew even worse, for Raft saw now that it was he himself who stood at that incredible angle, not the apparently tilted cave. It was bathed in faint violet light. The walls were crags, the roof, high above, dripped with stalactites that glittered wanly in the dimness.

The cave was narrow and curved right and left out of sight. The tunnel swept down in a dizzying arc and vanished into a spot of darkness in a distant wall. Raft knew that he should be totally unable to keep his footing on that tremendous slide. But as he advanced gingerly on the invisible flooring, it seemed the cavern and not himself was defying gravity.

Far down in the violet darkness something moved. Something alive. Raft could not see it clearly. Beyond it was another motion, and up among the crags of the walls, still more motion. The high, narrow, violently tilted cavern was coming alive all around him with those moving shadows which converged upon him as he stood frozen there in midair.

Devils of Paititi!

Biologically they were impossible. He could see only their outlines, but there were shadows that looked like wings—and great talons—and—and other things. No two of them were alike. The logic of anatomy had gone wrong, somehow, and Raft's mouth felt dry and sour.

They had seen him, obviously. They were moving sluggishly toward him, with a slowness more disturbing than any speed—as if they knew they could afford to take their time.

A shudder shook Raft. Though he knew that Pereira and Craddock had come this way, suddenly his footing did not seem so secure on that airy bridge. He had the sensation of toppling on the brink of a pit thronging with monsters from pure nightmare. If there were a break in this tunnel of glass, disaster would overwhelm him.

Biological sports, he told himself, and went on.

Ten minutes further along the dark tunnel he came to a fork of the way, the first one he had encountered. There was no clue as to which way he should turn. At random Raft took the right-hand branch, and this time luck was with him.

The ending of the tunnel was an anti-climax. He saw the circle of light long before he reached it. It was a deep, clear radiance which seemed to block the passage. Another force-wall, Raft thought, like the substance of the tube itself. But it was different in that it reflected light, or glowed with a cool brilliance of its own.

He touched the smooth glossy surface of it. Nothing. Simply light made tangible. Light that was, he saw, growing paler as he watched.

Shadows and shapes appeared in the cloudy whiteness, ghostly and strange. A wavering outline darkened and altered. It was man-shaped, and Raft's gun slipped easily into his hand. Beyond the figure were other dim traceries, tall columns, and what seemed to be a stream.

The light faded and was gone. With a whispering murmur the barrier dissolved.

The stream became a staircase, dropping steeply away from Raft's feet to the floor of an immense hall empty save for the columns, huger than the Karnak pillars, that marched in diminishing rows into the distance. Empty, save for these, and for the girl who stood facing him, ten feet down the stairway, very lovely, and—with something subtly wrong about her round, soft face.

She moved her hands quickly. Behind Raft a whisper sang softly. He looked back,

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in time to see the barrier of the light spring into being across the tunnel's mouth.

The road back was closed.

CHAPTER IV

Janissa

SHE was as he remembered her from that brief glimpse in da Fonseca's lens. There was a prim, gay touch of wickedness about her small mouth. The shadowed eyes were aquamarine, given a subtle slant by the darkness about them. Her hair was—was tiger-striped.

Honey-yellow and dim gold, it was a cloud about her head, so fine that it seemed to fade off into invisibility.

Her garments, blue and gold, clung so closely to her slim body that they seemed like a second skin. At her waist was a wide belt, and now she thrust something into a pocket of it as she smiled at Raft.

With that smile her face changed. It was infinitely appealing, completely tender and welcoming. Her voice, when Raft heard it, was as he expected. A rippling murmur, with that same familiar haunting undertone he had caught in Pereira's voice.

The language was unknown to him, though. Seeing this, the girl switched to stumbling Portuguese, and then, shrugging her slim shoulders, tried an Indio dialect that Raft knew, though he had never heard it spoken in quite this way.

"Don't be frightened," she said. "If I guided you this far, do you think I'll let anything harm you now? Though once I was afraid, when you hesitated at the fork of the road. But you took the right turning."

Raft had holstered his gun, but his hand still lingered on its cool, reassuring metal. In the same dialect he answered her.

"You guided me here?"

"Of course. Parror does not know; he was too busy getting enough to eat outside." She chuckled. "He hated that. He's a good hunter, but burning meat over open flames—ugh! Parror is not as complacent as you may have thought."

"Parror?" Raft said. "Would that be Pereira?"

"Yes. Now come with me, Brian Raft. You see that I know your name. But there's much that I do not know, and you must tell me those things."

"No," Raft said. He hadn't moved from his position at the top of the staircase. "If you know so much, you know why I came here. Where's Dan Craddock?"

"Oh, he's awake now." She took a tiny lens from her belt and swung it idly. "Parror gave me back my mirror when he returned, since it was no longer needed to keep Craddock controlled. So I was able to see you coming through the jungle. You had looked into my mirror, and after that I could see you. Which was lucky for you, or you'd never have been able to open the gateway to Paititi."

"Take me to Craddock," Raft commanded, feeling very unsure of himself, and therefore acting very sure. "Now."

"All right." The girl's hand touched Raft's arm, urging him down the steps. As they descended the enormous columns seemed to rise above them, the vastness of the huge hall becoming more and more apparent.

"You haven't asked me my name," the low voice said.

"What is it?"

"Janissa," she told him. "And this is Paititi. But you must have known that."

Raft shook his head.

"You may know a lot about the outside world, but it's a one-way circuit. The only place I'd ever heard of Paititi was in a legend."

"We have our legends too."

They were at the foot of the stairs. Janissa guided him across the hall and through an arched opening into a mosaic-walled passage.

There were symbols on those walls, but they struck a note entirely strange to Raft. Once or twice he noticed pictures, but the figures in them seemed to have no resemblance to either Janissa or Pereira—Parror. He had no time to observe closely.

The girl led him into a smaller hall, up a stairway, and at last into a round room whose walls were softly padded with velvet, cushioned and quilted in patterns like flowers. The floor was padded, too. The whole room was like a great pillowed sofa.

HE HAD a moment to take it all in—the cushiony room, its strangeness and luxury, and the rich, deep colors of the velvet. He saw at one end of the room an oval door of some semi-translucent substance opening upon dim light, and in another wall

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was an archway, broad and low, which looked out upon moving trees.

There was something rather startling about the trees, but he had no time to look closely. He caught the fragrance of a breeze, though, smelling of flowers and damp jungle lushness where the sun seldom shines, and realized that he had come out at last upon the surface of the earth somewhere, after the long journey underground.

"Sit down and rest," Janissa said. "You've come far."

Raft shook his head.

"You said you were taking me to Craddock. Well?"

"I cannot do that yet. Parror is with him."

"Good." Raft touched his gun. Janissa merely smiled.

"In Parror's castle—in this land where he has power—you think that will help you?"

"I think so. If it won't, there are other ways." He unslung the rifle from his shoulder and leaned it against a cushioned wall. "I don't know what kind of superman Parror may be, but I'll bet he can't dodge a bullet."

"A bullet? Oh, I see. You are both right and wrong. Your weapon would have been useless against Parror outside, but in Paititi he is more vulnerable."

Raft stared at the strange, lovely, disturbingly different face upturned to him.

"Meaning what?"

"Parror does not know that you are here. So—"

"But Parror does know," said a very soft, smooth voice. Raft whirled, surprise heightening his pulse and making his breath catch. Parror!

He had come soundlessly through the oval door, and Raft realized, with some distantly logical corner of his mind, that Parror must have been much farther ahead than he had thought, for the man had had time to bathe and change from his ragged garments. The black beard was trimmed to no more than a velvety shadow outlining the heavy, but curiously delicate chin.

The garments he wore were thick, soft, gleaming like dull satin, and fitting so perfectly they might have been literally painted upon his body. He was fingering an odd weapon like a silver whip that hung from the broad jeweled belt he wore.

Raft felt suddenly very unsure of himself. This was too different a meeting from the one he had been anticipating. For this was not the jungle. There was, very definitely, something about Parror that made Raft's skin crawl. Wrong—wrong—a racial wrongness he could not define. He had felt it about Janissa, but not with the violence he felt now.

Arrogance clothed Parror like a garment. He was in his own environment. He was regally confident. Raft had an uncomfortable realization of his own awkwardness and crudity and, from the mockery in the velvety black eyes, he knew that Parror shared the thought.

Parror lifted his lip in a fastidious smile.

"You were not needed here," he said, in the Indio dialect. "But perhaps, after all I can find a use for you. Yes, I think I can."

"We may, Parror," Janissa murmured, and for an instant unsheathed swords seemed to flash between the two.

"Listen, Pereira or whatever you call yourself, we're going to have a talk," Raft said angrily. "Now. It'll be fast talking, too."

"It will?" Parror murmured, and moved the silver whip jingling in his hand.

"Where's Craddock? What did you do to him?"

"I did nothing. I showed him a certain mirror. Through it he saw—well, I do not know what he saw. But he was tranced."

"Wake him up. Take me to him."

"He is awake now."

"He'd better be," Raft said coldly, his eye on Parror's whip and his fingers touching a cool gun-butt. "You killed da Fonseca with this same funny business, didn't you?"

"Killed him? The mirror is mine. I lent it to him and took it back."

"Yours?" Janissa breathed.

PARROR ignored her. "What happened after that is no concern of mine. I had no further use for da Fonseca. And his tongue might have been a danger."

Sudden rage flooded Raft. The bearded man's arrogance, his indifference, even the subtle wrongness he could not put a name too made all the tension of the past three weeks crystallize into a hot fury. A bullet was not enough. Raft wanted to use his hands.

"You bicho!" he snarled. "If Craddock dies I'll break your filthy neck. Take me to him!"

He lunged forward and seized Parror's shoulder, feeling a savage delight in coming to grips with the man at last.

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He knew judo. He was well-muscled and agile. But he did not expect Parror to—explode.

It was as if the handsome bearded face vanished and a demon glared out through the flesh and bone of the features. In that instant of utter, inhuman rage Raft saw the lips flatten away from Parror's teeth in a tigerish snarl, and he hissed shockingly as he struggled to tear free. Raft felt the smooth surge of muscles, and the power in them was shocking too, out of all proportion to that sleek, long-limbed slenderness. There was a moment of straining conflict.

Behind him, above the roaring in his ears, Raft heard Janissa's voice.

"Brian! Let him go—quick!"

The desperate urgency of her tone made Raft respond.

Shaken, a little dazed by his own anger and by the sudden, explosive violence it had roused, he released Parror. He felt oddly dazzled. He had never seen any human being, sane or mad, in the grip of a fury as sudden or as demoniac as Parror's.

There was another thing, too. The closeness of the grip had revealed a new, totally unexpected feature. Under the muscular arch of Parror's chest Raft had felt a steady throbbing that was unmistakable.

And yet—back in the base hospital—the man had had no heartbeat!

Parror drew back, shook himself, relaxed into an imperturbable dignity. Miraculously, the insane fury was gone as suddenly as it had been roused.

"You must not touch those of our race in such a way, Brian," Janissa said softly. "If you must kill, then kill. But not maul."

Raft's own voice sounded strange to him.

"What is your race?" he asked, and his questioning gaze moved from the girl's demure face to the man's enigmatic dark eyes.

Parror said nothing. He only smiled, a long, slow, infinitely proud smile. And Raft read the answer. He had been seeing it more and more clearly every moment that passed, in every smooth, flowing motion of his body, even in his insane, inhuman fury at being touched. Inhuman indeed. Raft remembered what Parror had said in the hospital.

"I passed your ancestors, chattering and scratching themselves in the trees. And I passed my ancestors, too."

Yes, Raft knew now that he had passed them in the jungle unseeing, many times. They had gone silently by in the underbrush, on great padding feet, the shadows of the forest gliding across the shadowy markings of their bodies. He had heard their roaring in the dark, and seen their lambent eyes in the firelight.

Yes, he thought he knew, now, what race Parror's was. And Janissa's.

Not human. They came from a different stock. As a physician who had done biological and anthropological work, Raft knew that the incredible thing was not theoretically impossible. Evolution is not rigid. It is an accident that had made man the dominant, intelligent race. Accident, and the specialization of opposing thumbs.

Our ancestors were simian, arboreal, using those flexible hands to build the foundations of civilization. But in a different setup, the ruling race might have descended from dogs or reptiles or cats.

Cats.

It struck Raft suddenly, and he was shocked by the realization, that of all animals there is, except for the rodents who do not use it, only one which shows signs of developing an opposing thumb. The domestic cat does occasionally have an extra toe on each forefoot. An opposing toe.

The owner names it Mittens or Boxer and thinks no more about the matter. But given a little flexibility in that extra member, and given time and a favorable environment, such as this secret world of Paititi he did not yet know, what miracles might now develop!

FELINE stock. That, perhaps, explained a great deal, but it did not clear up the entire mystery by any means. Raft still had no idea of the connection between Parror and Dan Craddock, nor exactly what was the lens-mirror that had killed da Fonseca. There were many other problems as well. Too many.

He noticed a tenseness ripple through Janissa, as though she had bristled. The word sprang unbidden into his mind. Almost simultaneously, he caught a distant noise, the tramp of feet, the ringing of metal upon metal.

Parror did not seem surprised. He turned toward the translucent door, and shadows loomed against the pale panel. There was a knock.

"Parror?" Janissa said. Her voice held a question.

He spoke to her briefly in the tongue Raft did not understand. She looked quickly to-

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ward Raft. Her eyes grew blank. A veil of demure withdrawal dropped down upon her. Suddenly, with a smooth, lithe motion, she was on her feet and vanishing among the trees beyond the arched portal.

Parror called a command. The oval swept up and vanished. Across that threshold, silhouettes against faint light, came men. Men?

They wore close-fitting chain-mail, very finely meshed. Glittering caps of tiny metal links, interwoven into designs, protected their heads. There were ten of them, and each had at his belt a thin, bare blade like a rapier.

They had the same mingled strength and delicacy of features that marked Parror, the same lithe, flowing agility. The taint of the tiger was in the way they moved, and the way their slanted eyes glowed intently on Raft.

Parror had stepped back, with a little shrug, and the ten men, without pausing, closed in on Raft. He realized his danger, though none of them had drawn a sword. He sprang toward the wall where his rifle leaned, saw that he would be intercepted, and snatched out his revolver.

Thin, wiry metal burned like a hot brand about his wrist. Parror had lashed out with his whip. The gun spun from Raft's grip. He felt the onrush of charging bodies, but, curiously, none of the soldiers touched him.

The shining rapiers were out, flickering, gleaming, weaving a deadly mesh all around him. Up and down, feinting, dancing, the steel sang, and Raft drew back, respecting the menace of those glittering swords. He swung toward Parror, but the bearded man had retreated and stood by the open archway, watching alertly.

"He speaks the Indio?" a deep voice asked.

Parror nodded. A soldier with a bronzed, scarred face gestured toward Raft.

"Will you come with us peacefully?"

"Where?" Raft countered.

"To the Great Lord."

"So you're not the big shot around here," Raft said to Parror. "Okay, I'll play it that way. Maybe it won't turn out exactly as you expect."

Parror smiled. "I said I thought I could find a use for you," he murmured in Portuguese. Then he relapsed into the cryptic tongue of the cat-people, and the scarred soldier asked a quick question. Parror's answer seemed to be satisfactory, for the man lowered his rapier.

"Well, Craddock, will you come?" The guard looked at Raft and spoke in Indio.

Craddock? Raft started to answer but Parror cut him off. There was another quick, enigmatic exchange.

Raft interrupted.

"My name's not Craddock. I'm Brian Raft, and I came here after Craddock. That man—" He pointed at Parror "—kidnapped him."

"I'm sorry," Parror said. "Such a trick won't work, and I cannot help you now. The Great Lord rules here. You must talk to him. Best to go with Vann."

Vann, the scarred soldier, grunted.

"He's right. Lies will not save you. Come! As for you, Parror . . ."

He spat out a few words Raft could not understand. Parror's eyes narrowed, but he made no reply.

A point pricked Raft's back. With a longing glance toward his fallen gun, now, with rifle and rucksack, in the hands of the soldiers, he moved unwillingly forward. Over his shoulder he looked hard at Parror.

"I'll be back," he said, a world of promise in his tone.

Then he stepped through the oval portal, and was in Paititi.

CHAPTER V

Valley of Wonders

AGAIN, and ever after that, he was conscious of the indefinable strangeness about the lost land that set it apart from any other of which he had heard. Raft had read tales of hidden civilizations, of Atlantis, Lemuria, and fantastic survivals from the past.

But in Paititi he found nothing of such arabesques—no jewel-city set down on an uncharted sea, no isolated world cut off from the earth outside. Nevertheless Paititi was as secret, as isolated, as if it had been on another planet.

It was too alive to be regarded as anything but a vivid, vital reality. Mixed with that tremendous vitality which pulsed through Paititi was the strangeness that hung like an intangible veil between earth and sky, the thing that had made this secret valley a place blessed and cursed as no spot on earth ever had before been.

Something had leaned down and touched

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the soil of Paititi, the trees of Paititi, the very air that breathed through alien leaves, and there had come a change. It was as though the touch of that unearthly thing had altered all that dwelt here, changing and transmuting until what remained was different.

It was a valley, probably a meteoric one, Raft thought, remembering that fifty-mile-wide circle of jungle he had seen from above. But it was well camouflaged. No earthly trees could have fulfilled that task, and no earthly trees grew here. Looking out across that dim twilit land, he was reminded of the columnar pillars that had marched across the hall where the invisible tube ended. Pillars of Karnak—but dwarfed by comparison with these trees that might have upheld the sky itself.

Yggdrasil is the tree of life which Norsemen say supports the world.

Only the largest California redwoods could have approached their sheer magnitude. For each one, in diameter, was as thick as a city block is long. They grew at irregular intervals, a half-mile or more apart, and they towered up to a luminous green ceiling which was incredibly far above. A tree five miles high!

Up they plunged into that green sky, and down into the depths those vast columns fell, like arrows of titan gods deeply embedded in the earth.

Their roots, Raft thought, might tap the very roof of Hell. Without branches, smooth and straight, they grew until, at their tops, they burst into a rank lushness of green.

Yet that green vault was translucent. At one point, almost directly overhead, an emerald brilliance told of the noonday tropic sun. But in the valley itself hung a clear, cool dawn-light that hid nothing.

Transparent as the air was, the trees themselves made a barrier. Raft could see a curving arch winding down from where he stood, fifty yards or more to a path that disappeared into that mighty forest. From far away came a very low, scarcely audible rumble, almost below the threshold of hearing.

That was all. Except that Vann tilted back his head and stared up questioningly. Raft followed his example.

Behind him were smooth walls and towers, the bulk of Parror's palace that jutted out from the base of a rock cliff, an escarpment which swept up and up till it vanished amid the ceiling of green. And dropping toward them with nightmare slowness was a cloud of rubble and stone.

"It's only a landslide," Vann said casually. He pushed Raft forward. "There's no danger."

"No danger!"

"Of course not." The soldier was surprised. "Surely you know why."

Again Raft looked up. The avalanche was perceptibly nearer, but by no means as close as it should normally have been. A great boulder struck a ledge, bounded out, and Raft fixed his gaze upon it.

It fell slowly—slowly!

It drifted down, revolving gently as it fell, floating out in an arc that ended briefly at one of the castle's turrets. It rebounded, doing no harm to the structure that Raft could see. It dropped past him, so sluggishly that he could make out every detail of its craggy surface, and embedded itself in the ground below.

THAT boulder had not been feather-light. Yet it had floated down as slowly as any feather.

"Move, Craddock," Vann said, and pushed Raft away from a watermelon-sized rock that struck the ramp and bounded away gently. The other soldiers, looking up, shifted casually to avoid the falling stones. Raft, utterly dumbfounded, stared up.

"I thought it would wreck the castle," he said.

"No. The ones who built here built for an eternity," Vann told him. "Not our race, but they were very great once."

"What the devil made those rocks fall so slowly?"

The soldier shrugged.

"They fall faster now than in the days of our fathers. But they are still not dangerous. Only living things can harm one of us. Now we've talked enough. Come."

He took Raft's arm firmly and led him down the aerial pathway. The soldiers followed, their arms clinking softly, mesh-armor murmuring metallically against steel blades.

Yes, Raft thought, they had talked enough. Or else not nearly enough. Mystery after mystery was piling up here, and no sooner did he seem to solve one puzzle than another appeared.

The fact that this race sprang from feline stock explained much, but it certainly did not begin to explain boulders that dropped

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from the sky as lightly as air-inflated, toy balloons.

Nor did it solve the mystery that surrounded Parror's actions, or Janissa's. At first the girl had seemed friendly. Then she had given up to Parror without an argument. Moreover, the soldiers thought he was Dan Craddock.

Parror had taken advantage of that twist very neatly, and Raft knew there was no use trying to prove his identity to Vann. But when he was taken to the Great Lord, presumably the ruler of Paititi, there would be a chance then. Unless, of course, the Great Lord was a hairy savage who wore human skulls at his belt.

Raft grinned wryly. Savagery there was in this land, he knew already, but it was not barbarous. There was a high culture here, an intelligent civilization, though it was alien. A feline world would be strikingly different from a human one, yet the same basics would apply. An isosocles triangle was the same on Earth or Mars.

Unfortunately, he probably would not be dealing in geometry. The subtler pitfalls of psychology loomed before him, and in that feline and anthropoid might be very dissimilar. A cat people, in fact, would not be builders.

They would be artisans. Vann had already said that some other race had built Parror's castle. A race that had been very great once. When? A thousand years ago? Or a million? It had taken man eons to evolve into rational beings, and evolution moved at a predetermined rate. Not even mutations could create an intelligent cat-race from feline stock in a few generations.

There was no use even in wondering about such things now. He stepped from the smooth footing of the ramp on to an ordinary dirt pathway that led off among the colossal trees. Now, with his feet actually touching the ground of Paititi, he felt the strangeness of his surroundings more strongly than ever. Those incredible columns seemed to be moving toward him, a giant Birnam Wood malignantly alive. Trees!

For they were trees, not Jurassic cycads, not tree-ferns. He could tell that. They were true trees, but they should have grown on a planet as large as Jupiter, not on Earth.

They were sanctuaries as well, retreats for living organisms, he saw as the trail passed near the towering wall of one. From a distance he had thought the bark smooth. Instead, it was literally covered with irregular bumps and swellings.

Vines slid across the trunk like snakes, creeping with a slowness that belied the sudden flash of tendrils as—tongues?—snapped out to capture the insects and birds that fluttered past.

Rainbow flowers glowed on the leafless vines, and a heavy, sweet scent drifted into Raft's nostrils. From something like a shallow shell that jutted from the trunk a lizard darted out, seized a vine, and carried it back, writhing, to its water-brimming den. There it proceeded to drown the snaky thing and devour it at leisure.

BUT the reptile was no lizard. It was, Raft decided, a saurian. Only three feet long, it nevertheless reminded him of the great caymans that teem in Brazilian rivers. Except, of course, that crocs are meat eaters.

The saurian was no freak, for there were others just like it. Swelling pale excresences bulged on the tree, like wasps' nests thirty feet tall, with myriad window-openings from which bright eyes glittered at Raft. Furry brown bodies moved rapidly across these nests, little mammals with tapir-snouts, but adapted to tree-life.

There were other parasites on that enormous tree, like the great crimson leech that clung to the bark and sucked sap out to nourish its hideous length, and the inch-long, hairless, white creatures like monkeys that lived like lice upon the sloth things that clambered with extraordinary agility in pursuit of insect prey.

It would have been symbiosis, except that the parasites had nothing to give the trees upon which they lived as on a world. Trees and living vines and the rubbery pale moss that bordered the path, there was no other vegetation here.

But of the fantastic there was much. Before Raft's amazement had died they crossed a brook, a half mile further on, by a narrow bridge that might have been made of glowing plastics. No fish were visible through that glassy translucence, and as Raft looked down, he felt that nothing remotely normal could ever exist in those enchanted waters. For the stream, too, was wrong.

It was silent. It did not purl and ripple softly over the rocky bed. Small cascades and waterfalls dropped, with hypnotic, quiet slowness, into the pools beneath. Ripples

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spread out very gently, very slowly, to die against the mossy banks.

It was not water. Water it could not be. It seemed half congealed.

Yet when Raft, with a questioning glance at Vann, knelt beside the brook and lifted cupped hands to his mouth, it was water. Droplets escaped from between his fingers and floated down gently to fall upon the thirsty moss.

Slowly as the boulders that had dropped upon Parror's castle the waters glided on—silently. It was Oberon's glade, where sorcery lay heavy. The sweet fragrance of the living vine-flowers hung on the clear air.

What spell holds this land, Raft thought? What magic stooped and touched it once, long ago? Surely a god walked here once. But what god? One of Earth, or one from beyond even the stars?

Silently he let Vann urge him along the path. The sooner he reached his destination, the sooner his questions might be answered.

But the monotony of the journey grew tiring at last. Once a castle, a small structure compared to Parror's fortress, was visible under the shelter of the forest, but the soldiers by-passed it without a glance. Raft eyed the scar-faced Vann.

"How much further have we to go?"

"It is still a long way."

He was right. The hours dragged past, and Raft's occasional glances at his wrist watch made him conscious of a puzzling new factor. They must have covered more than fifteen miles, but his watch said that only fifteen minutes had passed. Overhead that brightness in the green vault had not moved. The sun, apparently, stood still over Paititi.

Nor had it moved when, a long while later, they came out of the forest at the edge of a mile-wide clearing—or what seemed to be a clearing.

Directly ahead, blocking the way, stood a turreted palace that would have seemed huge except for the trees that dwarfed it. Even so, it was an enormous structure.

What lay beyond it Raft could not see, but he could make out a shapeless pale cloud that hung in the sky beyond those thrusting pinnacles, a formless whiteness that seethed and curled slowly into new suggestions of luminous hugeness.

A broad river ran toward the castle, and under it. The torrent plunged into a high-arched opening beneath that architectural colossus, and was lost.

RAFT was stumbling and exhausted. The two long journeys, first through the underground tube that led to Paititi, and then this fast hike, had turned his muscles to water. He was so utterly tired by now that he saw his destination through a sort of mist, and Vann's voice came from a long distance away. He let himself be urged forward, mechanically moving his legs to keep up with the soldiers.

There was a courtyard. Figures moved about it. A throng of brightly clad figures, with the half-Egyptian faces of the cat-people, all intent on the spectacle in their midst. A high-pitched singing came from a man crouching atop a high stone block.

Exultant wildness shrilled out as he chanted a song in the language Raft did not understand. The crouching man played some complicated string instrument that sounded vaguely like the bagpipes.

In the center of the courtyard two men were fighting. One was a giant, tall, smoothly-muscled, with a strong face already masked by blood. The other man was more remarkable. Raft's eyes were drawn to him.

He was like Parror, and yet unlike. In place of the sleek, powerful look of the puma, this man was as lithe and swift as the hunting cheetahs of the old Hindu rajahs.

Supple and light, his hair a fine mist about that strong, delicate face, the man sprang out of his opponent's way, laughing, and slashed down with claws.

He wore a glove, a gauntlet, that was tipped with three curved metal blades like talons. Needle-sharp they were, for three long cuts opened like mouths across the larger man's bare chest, and blood spouted.

The minstrel's song rose to a thin shrilling in which there was something drunken and almost mad. The music sang and sang. It cried of love and death, and in it was the choking, musty smell of fresh blood.

Turn and dodge and slay.

Metal grated as the two taloned gloves clawed together. The men bounded apart as though on springs instead of muscles of flesh. The giant shook his head, wiping crimson from his eyes. The other paused, with a careless gesture, to glance at Raft. His irises were blazing yellow. He had slit-like pupils.

His blond hair, almost orange, was oddly marked by shadowy patterns of cloudy black. As he smiled, Raft almost expected to see the sharp teeth of a predatory leopard. Red droplets fell from those murderous gauntlets

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to a brown thigh. He called a question.

Vann answered, and the yellow-haired man lifted one shoulder impatiently. He spoke a few casual syllables, and turned back to the giant, lifting a taloned glove.

For answer his opponent leaped in, and the two agile figures were again lost in that deadly, graceful dance. Vann, his eyes glowing, touched Raft's arm.

"Come. You must sleep now."

Raft's brief excitement had died. The dull stupor of exhaustion made a protective barrier around Raft. Without another glance at the duel, he went with Vann through a portal, along halls and up spiraling ramps, lost in a foggy dimness of sheer physical tiredness. He felt Vann's hand halt him at last.

"Sleep, now. Darum will see you after you've rested."

"Darum?" Raft saw cushions at his feet, and dropped heavily upon them. "Who's Darum?"

"You just saw him fighting. He is the Great Lord. He rules. But now he fights, and after that—"

Vann's voice died away, merging with the faint, drowsy humming of—of what?

A purring, sub-sonic vibration thrilled through Raft. Deep, comforting it throbbed through the very structure of the castle. As though the castle lived. As though the hidden pulse of life stirred in the stone.

That alien whisper lulled Raft to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

Mad King

MANY hours later, Raft awoke, refreshed but stiff and aching. Colored light came through tall windows, pastel patterns that shifted and glowed on the pallor of the thick carpet.

He was in what seemed to be a sleeping-chamber. There were mirrors on the walls, many of them, and the room, he noticed, had no corners. It was a silken, padded nest, strewn carelessly with silks and pillows, and with low, round couches here and there.

There was an oval door in the wall, but no shadow loomed against it. That did not, however, mean that there was no guard. Raft yawned, stretched, and felt his muscles and joints crackle with stiffness. But, aside from various dull aches, he felt alert and ravenously hungry.

The dim humming still vibrated through him. He turned to the window, pushed open a pane, and stepped out onto the balustraded porch beyond. There he paused, staring.

Overhead the sun had moved a fraction—that was all. He saw it vaguely, for a towering pillar of mist dimmed his vision. Looking down, he understood the reason.

Beneath him a gulf opened. The porch overhung a broad platform lower down which jutted out over an abyss clouded with white fog. A silver torrent of ice shot out in an arc and fell away into that incredible depth.

Not ice, no, for it moved slowly. It was the river that flowed beneath the castle, to drop into the gulf that lay directly under Raft. He tried to probe the depths, but the boiling maelstrom of mist baffled him. The cataract fell and was lost.

Fell—slowly. Mist rose slowly too, a gelid ghost towering high above the castle. The deep humming was louder now, and the stone beneath Raft's feet vibrated to its murmuring. Sub-sonic. The crashing roar of a waterfall, resolved by some physical warp or distortion into that dim throbbing he felt rather than heard.

beginning to understand a little now. His

Frowning, Raft left the balcony. He was mind, refreshed by deep sleep, was clearer. Slow water, stones that fell like feathers, a sun that dragged itself wearily across that green sky. Time, it seemed, was different here. Was this lost land actually on Earth? The same Earth that held the Amazon Basin, and Rio, and New York? Perhaps not.

He tried to fathom the mystery of the oval door. He could not, but it slipped upward and vanished suddenly, and Vann stood on the threshold, his scarred face alert.

"So you're awake," Van said in the Indio. "Good. Darum wants to see you, but he's resting now. You'll want a bath."

"And food," Raft said. "Does Darum wear those gloves all the time?"

Vann called a command over his shoulders. Then he stepped forward into the room, smiling.

"Only for tourneys. He's less dangerous when he wears the gloves. I'll show you the bath, Craddock."

"I'm not Craddock. I told you before I'm not Craddock."

But Vann paid no attention. He moved

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levers on the wall, and part of the floor slid aside, revealing a shallow, wide basin filled with a liquid the color of creme de menthe. Gratefully Raft slipped out of his ragged clothes and lowered himself into the bath. Vann watched with a grimace of distaste.

"It'll take several washings to get you clean," he remarked. "Here." He found a jar and sprinkled blue powder into the water. An astringent, tingling sensation ran across Raft's skin.

There were brushes, many of them, instruments like Roman strigils, and other gadgets Raft experimented with under Vann's guidance. The water was awkward to handle because of its sluggishness.

Once Raft dropped a brush. He watched it float gently down till it dug a hole in the water, a hole that gradually refilled, while ripples crept out to the rim.

But a bath was luxury, and the aches began to leave Raft's muscles. Vann watched unblinkingly, commenting once on the coarseness of his prisoner's hair, and providing a gleaming unguent which Raft's skin absorbed leaving him stimulated. Finally a page appeared, pushing a wheeled table laden with unfamiliar food, and stood motionless, struck with amazement as he eyed the figure in the bath.

Vann gestured, and the loose-limbed, dapper youngster, with his daintily malicious triangular face, bowed and fled, without removing his startled gaze from Raft.

"No wonder he's surprised," Vann remarked. "Your muscalature is so different from ours that you looked deformed to him. But I'd like to fight you some time, if opportunity arises."

"Thanks," Raft said. "You'd have a fine time cutting my throat with one of those gloves."

"Not at all." Vann smiled savagely. "Killing is a different thing entirely. The point in murder is not to be found out. But a fight, a duel—they're very seldom fatal." He found tight garments like his own and helped Raft don them. "I'd have too much of an advantage if I wore the gloves. What weapons do you use usually?"

"Rifles," Raft said. He explained about duels.

"Strange," the soldier said. "I should think there'd be little satisfaction in propelling a missile. You wouldn't be able to feel your blade go in. There'd be no physical pleasure."

"All right. We'll box, fight with our fists."

"Depending on impact alone? That doesn't seem interesting. Don't you use swords at all?"

"Some of us do," Raft said. "But I'm no swordsman myself. What was that you said about murder? Is homicide legal here?"

"No," Vann said. "We're not barbarians. A murderer has to pay restitution, if he's found out. But only the stupid are caught."

"Oh," Raft said blankly, tackling a pulpy, acrid fruit like an orange. "There's a police force, then?"

HE HAD to explain, but finally Vann understood.

"We have specialists in detection. If a murderer can escape their skill, he's safe enough. The trick is—I think—to conceal the motive. Killers are caught because they haven't disguised their motives." He shook his head deprecatingly.

"Just what is the set-up here?" Raft asked. "Does Darum rule all Paititi?"

Vann nodded.

"Yes. The set-up is—well, that of any civilized land."

"Sure. Homicide for fun. How is it you can talk the Indio tongue?"

"You aren't the first outsider to enter Paititi. We have had brown-skinned men here in our fathers' time, though it has always been difficult for us to leave our valley. Parror's ancestors had captive Indios sometimes, and most of us know the language."

Raft thought that logical. Linguist ability was a mark of the cosmopolitan, and a catrace would certainly be cosmopolitan, even if it never left this hidden valley.

"And Portuguese?"

"What?"

"Falam português?"

"That is strange to me," Vann admitted.

"Then Parror picked it up? And Janissa, too." Raft nodded thoughtfully.

Then he remembered the aviator. "Was there a man of my race here, a man named da Fonseca, who had a machine which flew through the air? About—about fifty sleeps ago?"

Vann's face lighted up. "The machine that flies fell into Paititi about four hundred sleeps ago, killing all but one man, whom Parror took to his castle. Yes, that was da Fonseca, for with his aid Parror read the notebook you left in the Cavern of the Flame."

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Raft put down a morsel untasted.

"Four hundred sleeps?" he said, a queer hesitation in his voice. "Over a year ago. How long have I been in Paititi, Vann?"

"I captured you yesterday," the soldier said. "And that was directly after your arrival. I was watching for Parror's return from the outer world. So I knew when to strike."

"I see," Raft said, though he didn't. "What about this notebook, and the Cavern of the Flame? What's that?"

"You did not see the Cavern?"

"I saw a cavern, with some unpleasant creatures in it. Is that what you mean?"

A shudder shook Vann. Briefly a touch of fear showed in his eyes. "No—no. That is not what I mean." He changed the subject abruptly. "You must see Darum now. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I ever will be, I suppose."

"Very well." Vann stood up, turning toward the door. Raft accompanied his guard into a dimly-lighted hall and along it. After a while Vann broke silence.

"The Great Lord has fought and had his pleasure afterward, and slept. He will be strange now. A word of advice, Craddock."

"I'm—well, what is it?"

"Something hangs in the balance now," Vann said thoughtfully, his gaze on the floor as they walked. "For myself, I am not sure. I am on neither side as yet. Darum, too, hesitates.

"He had you taken from Parror before the —the final step could be taken, but he may yet side with Parror. If he does, that will be well for you. Or perhaps evil, in the end. I cannot see that far ahead. But I will say this, since you are of an alien race, you would do well to heed it. Darum—is mad."

A little shock went through Raft. He stared at the soldier.

"Mad? Your king?"

"Yes."

"And he rules?"

"Of course," Vann said. "Why not? For often he is not mad, and when he is, that does not matter much. But with you it may mean the difference between life and death. Perhaps," he went on musingly, "life and death for Paititi. Remember that Darum is not your kind."

"I hope not," Raft said candidly.

"He is of our kind," Vann murmured, and his eyes were luminous. "Now—I hope you live. For I'd enjoy a duel with you, Craddock. And here is your way." He held aside a heavy tapestry, revealing a dim corridor. "Go in."

"Thanks," Raft said.

He stepped forward. Behind him, Vann let the curtain fall. There was silence, except for the never-ceasing vibration that shook the castle. Even here its steady humming could be felt.

RAFT walked toward another drapery that barred the way ahead.

A different race, he thought, and a different species. They murder for intellectual pleasure and duel for physical excitement. They see nothing amiss in a mad king.

He hesitated before the curtain. Then he pushed it aside and stepped through, into a ruddy darkness.

The dim, faint glow came from all around. How large the room might be Raft had no way of guessing. He saw shrouded shapes looming before him, and, in heavier shadow, something stirred and looked at him with eyes that were glowing disks. A cool, sharp perfume was in his nostrils. That infernal humming seemed to shake the dark air.

There was no sound. Raft, after a moment, moved forward. The eyes watched him steadily. At last he could make out a slim figure reclining on a bulkier, shapeless mass—the smooth outline of a jaw, and the cloudy mist of hair fading into invisibility.

Raft stood there, waiting.

He sensed that this was not the same man he had seen fighting and laughing in the courtyard. There was a difference, even physically. In the gloom a change had come upon Darum, a strangeness that was indefinable and yet unmistakable.

"Sit down," the king said, in the Indio tongue. Even his voice had altered. It was passionless, like music heard from very far away.

Raft fumbled, found a couch, and dropped upon it. The eyes had a touch of green in them as they watched.

"Listen," Darum said.

At the king's feet a shadow stirred. Its soft curves were those of a woman, but from that vague figure a subtle breath of terror breathed out, chilling Raft. There was a sound, almost a voice. Woodwind and sighing strings—plaintive, questioning.

Again the king spoke.

"Yrann wonders. She wonders why you come to Paititi, Craddock. Music is her voice,

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for she will not speak. But she asks who are you? What is your world?"

The soft strings sang again. Sang a question.

Raft leaned forward, as though to break the spell. But the king's eyes held him.

"He is a god, Yrann. Craddock was in the beginning, and now he comes again, very near the end. Since his eyes first saw Paititi, a race has been born and draws close to the shadow. The shadow that the Flame casts over all living things."

The sighing oboe-flute spoke of a gathering darkness, of a cloud that stooped above the land.

"And yet there are other shadows," the king whispered. "There was a woman once, Yrann, whose loveliness burned like magic fires. Fires that could make men drunken. A fire that could make men mad, as I know. As I know."

Stealthy fear circled Raft's heart. Poignant, eerie, the music sang, and the dim gloom showed the half-seen, half-veiled curves of soft skin and rounded shoulders. At Darum's feet Yrann swept slim fingers across sobbing strings.

"And the fire burned," the king went on softly. "In all Paititi there was none so beautiful as this woman. When she danced, the tall trees inclined in homage. When she smiled, the stones bowed down."

A note of pride crept into the wordless song. The sundrenched spring of green forests came into the dark chamber; the sound of laughter, and flaunting bright cloaks, and clashing steel. The music pirouetted into a gay, lilting dance.

Heavily the king's voice broke in. The music sank to a whisper.

"There was a man who loved this woman. He took her for his own. And she laughed. Laughed—knowing power as well as beauty, growing drunken at the thought of ruling Paititi. Of ruling the man who was the king."

Proud, triumphant, the song rose. Ivory arms gleamed.

"And her eyes fell upon a man who was not a king. But she knew that in her arms, any man might be the emperor of the universe, and the equal of the gods. Nor was she wrong. If her embrace meant death, death would be sweet poison."

TINKLING, mocking laughter, and an undertone of sadness in the music now.

"She was faithless," the king said, his words falling heavily as stones into the still air. "Those lips were faithless. And the arms of Yrann sought another, and the white body of Yrann yearned too."

The song hushed almost to silence.

"Long ago. Very long ago. Now she is no longer faithless. Nor is the king sorrowful. Maidens dance before him. They ask his love, but he has none to give. His love is for Yrann, most beautiful of all womankind, and she—she loves him now."

Tender, obedient, the oboe murmured softly.

"But the king is mad," the quiet, cool voice said, and the music died into stillness. "There was a red hour long ago when the madness entered into him. That hour will not pass, Yrann, and love and madness dwell forever side by side."

For a long time, there was no sound but the faint vibration of the cataract making the castle tremble in its iron grip.

"We speak together, Yrann and I, of things forgotten and things that are not forgotten," the king said at last. "But music is her tongue now." His voice changed. "Yrann must not die, though Paititi dies. I think that you hold a certain answer in your hand, Craddock, and whether I let you open your grip upon that great secret is something I cannot tell yet. We must talk first. There are many questions."

For the first time Raft spoke. He moistened his lips.

"One question has to be settled first," he said.

"And that is?"

"I'm not Craddock."

The eyes watched him. Raft plunged on. "I tried to tell your soldier, Vann, but he didn't believe me. I don't know what story Parror had. It must have been a good one. For Craddock's in Parror's castle now, his captive. I came here to rescue Dan Craddock, and my name is Brian Raft."

"I cannot believe that."

"Why should I lie?" Raft asked. "What could I gain?"

"You might have many reasons. And yet Parror is clever too. If he had wanted to gain time, he might use deception."

"Janissa knows who I am. The girl in Parror's castle."

"But will Janissa speak the truth?" Darum asked. "Her mind is like a wind, changing and changing. Tell me your story, then. It

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may be a lie, or it may not. But I will listen."

Raft talked. He marshaled his thoughts as clearly as he could, though the ruddy dimness of the room played strange tricks on his nerves. When he had finished, the glowing eyes of King Darum were half-closed.

"Go," Darum said.

Raft hesitated. The deep voice sounded again, more commandingly.

"Go," I said. "We will speak again later. Now I must test your story."

Raft stood up. From the half-glimpsed figure at Darum's feet that exotic, haunting music breathed out again. Caressing, gentle, and indefinably sad.

The king's eyes watched him.

Stumbling, Raft moved across the chamber. He felt the velvet folds of the curtain against his face. He lifted it, stepped under its soft drape. Behind him light flared. The music rose shrilly. Raft half-turned.

On a dais strewn with cushions Darum was standing, his face hidden as he looked down at the figure at his feet. Nor had Raft's guess been wrong as to the loveliness of those ivory limbs, that half-veiled beautiful body. But Yrann's face was not veiled.

And her face was—horror.

Into Raft's mind flashed unbidden memory of the cruel-taloned gauntlet he had seen on the king's hand. Something terrible and savage and mad had destroyed the beauty of Yrann's face, leaving her goddess body untouched.

The king looked up. His eyes met Raft's.

Raft stepped backward into the corridor and let the shielding curtain fall into place.

CHAPTER VII

Dread Flame

HIS watch said minutes had passed, but Raft knew that it had been hours since his interview with the lord of Paititi. Impatiently he waited in his apartment, left alone with his puzzled thoughts. He could not fathom the trick of the door, and Vann, after escorting him back here, had not reappeared. From the balustraded porch nothing could be seen but the torrent pouring lazily into the abyss below.

The room was sterile. It was beautiful, luxurious, but it held nothing that aroused Raft's interest. Inaction was twanging his nerves into tense irritability. He seemed the only thing not frozen into semi-stasis in this strange land.

A long time had passed when from beyond the window he heard his name called softly. He knew the voice. A stir of excitement quickened him as he hastily stepped out on the balcony. But there was nothing.

Only falling water. Lazy falling water.

"Brian!" The low call came again. "Brian Raft!"

He leaned over the rail, and found himself looking down into the soft, familiar face of Janissa. The aquamarine eyes were darker now, almost purple. She was clinging to grips and footholds on the castle's wall, crannies where it seemed not even a squirrel could find lodgment.

Catching his breath, Raft leaned down, extending his arm. But Janissa murmured a quick warning.

"Get a cushion, Brian. Bring it. No, I'm safe enough here. Do as I say."

He hesitated, turned, and hurried back into the room, where he snatched up the nearest cushion and carried it out with him. Janissa had not moved. Her slim body was flattened against the stone.

"Hold it by a corner. Yes, that's it. And lower it toward me, very carefully. Don't lose your grip on it."

Raft obeyed. There was a sudden whir and a flash of steel, and the cushion was almost torn from his hand. From the smooth wall beneath the railing a fan of sharp blades had leaped out, one of them impaling the pillow as Janissa's flesh would have been pierced had she continued her climb.

Her teeth showed in a smile.

"Now it's safe, I think. Give me your hand." With feline agility she clambered up, writhing between the swords so that no blade or edge touched her. On the balcony she shook herself, patted her hair, and took the cushion from Raft.

"You're alone? I thought you would be. I asked questions before trying this climb."

"You might have been killed," Raft said, looking down into dizzying emptiness where the slow cataract poured into bottomless deeps and the slower mist wreathed up in a swaying tower. Then he turned to the girl and, as he met her smile, he felt a little dizziness that did not come from vertigo.

[*Turn to page 40*]

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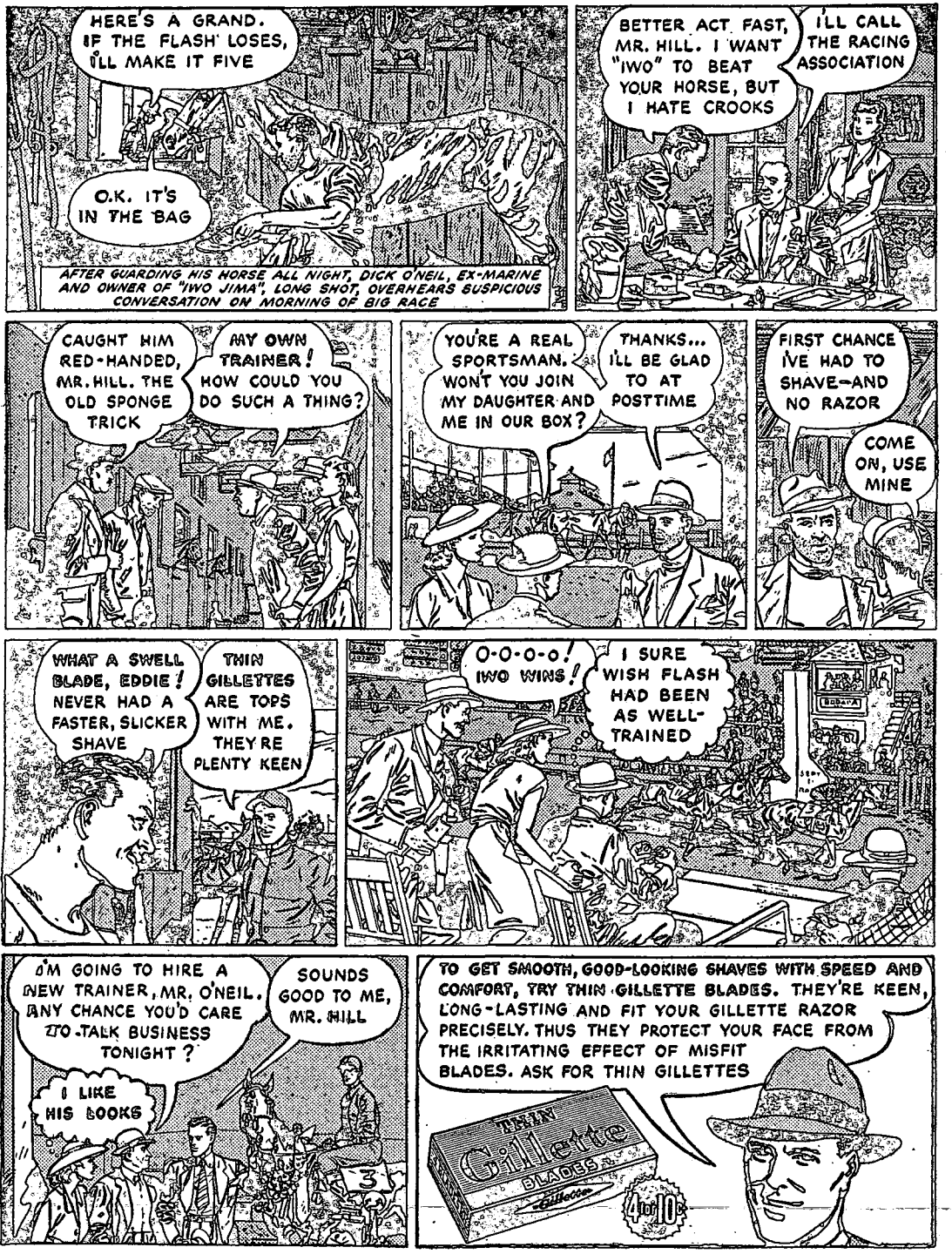
DICK WON ALL AROUND WHEN...


HERE'S A GRAND. IF THE FLASH LOSES, I'LL MAKE IT FIVE
O.K. IT'S IN THE BAG
AFTER GUARDING HIS HORSE ALL NIGHT, DICK O'NEIL, EX-MARINE AND OWNER OF "IWO JIMA", LONG SHOT, OVERHEARS SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION ON MORNING OF BIG RACE
BETTER ACT FAST, MR. HILL. I WANT "IWO" TO BEAT YOUR HORSE, BUT I HATE CROOKS
I'LL CALL THE RACING ASSOCIATION
CAUGHT HIM RED-HANDED, MR. HILL. THE OLD SPONGE TRICK
MY OWN TRAINER! HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING?
YOU'RE A REAL SPORTSMAN. WON'T YOU JOIN MY DAUGHTER AND ME IN OUR BOX?
THANKS... I'LL BE GLAD TO AT POSTTIME
FIRST CHANCE I'VE HAD TO SHAVE—AND NO RAZOR
COME ON, USE MINE
WHAT A SWELL BLADE, EDDIE! NEVER HAD A FASTER, SLICKER SHAVE
THIN GILLETTES ARE TOPS WITH ME. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN
O-O-O-O! IWO WINS!
I SURE WISH FLASH HAD BEEN AS WELL-TRAINED
I'M GOING TO HIRE A NEW TRAINER, MR. O'NEIL. ANY CHANCE YOU'D CARE TO TALK BUSINESS TONIGHT?
SOUNDS GOOD TO ME, MR. HILL
I LIKE HIS BOOKS
TO GET SMOOTH, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH SPEED AND COMFORT, TRY THIN GILLETTE BLADES. THEY'RE KEEN, LONG-LASTING AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. THUS THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 for 10¢

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This was the face that had drawn him over miles of river and jungle almost as unerringly as Craddock's trail had drawn him. No one, he thought, could have looked once upon this delicate, soft, malicious little creature and not wanted to look again.

In their first meeting he had been tired and bewildered. Today he could gaze more clearly into the aquamarine eyes and the gay, yet prim face of this contradictory girl. He stared frankly, trying to make the clear gaze waver.

Janissa laughed.

"We've met before, remember?" she jibed.

Raft grinned.

"Sorry. It was just— Do your people here know how beautiful you are?"

"Men of all races must be very much alike," Janissa parried demurely. "We must think about you just now, Brian Raft. You're in trouble."

"Trouble you walked out on, I remember." He did not mean to let her attractiveness blind him to that memory.

She shrugged lithely.

"What could I do then? Now I've walked in again, and you must forgive me."

He glanced over the balcony rail and shuddered. "You certainly did take a long chance. Lucky you weren't killed."

"Not by a fall. Not my race! Though if you hadn't been here to spring the trap, I might have had some trouble. Let's go in. We may be seen from another balcony."

She stepped through the window, stared around, and tossed the slashed cushion away. "Now we can talk."

RAFT followed her, seeing how supple was the movement of her round, smooth limbs as they glided beneath velvety garments. She tilted him a sweetly wicked smile over one shoulder and shook the cloudy tiger-striped hair. There was a mound of silken cushions against the nearer wall. She laid a hand on Raft's arm and drew him down beside her to a cross-legged seat among them.

"We have much to tell each other," she said. "And perhaps not a very long time to do it in."

"You'll have to start, then. Remember, I don't know anything at all."

"I suppose not," Janissa murmured. There was a soft roughness to her voice when she lowered it, a luxuriant roughness, like a purr. "Not even Craddock knew, really, though he —created—our race. And now he does not remember certain things. So Parror will have to build a device that—"

"Suppose you start at the beginning," Raft interrupted her. "First, where is Paititi? On my own planet?"

"Yes. We know that, for some of us have gone through the unseen road to the jungle land outside. Not many, and only guardians, like Parror and myself. I went once and only once. It was horrible. Your world is frozen. Nothing moves.

"When we meet others outside, you know, we have to force ourselves to do everything as slowly as people in a nightmare. Otherwise we'd be only a blur when they looked at us. But we cannot live long outside Paititi, unless we carry something of the Flame with us."

"The Flame?" Raft echoed. "The Flame?"

"The Flame is the source of all life," Janissa said soberly. "In our whole land there are only two amulets that hold a little fiery seed of the Flame itself. We do not know how to make them. These two are very old, our heritage from the ancient race that lived here before us." Her eyes narrowed. "Parror has one. I should have the other. It's my right as Guardian. But the king claims it, and—well, never mind. I have my plans. The time is coming when—"

"Please," Raft broke in. "First tell me about this business of speed, and your people moving faster than ours. Why?"

"The Flame is sinking," Janissa said in a somber voice. "That is why Parror sought out Craddock. You see, Paititi was not always as it is now. In the old days, generations lived and died during the day, and other generations in a night. And before that, hundreds of generations in a day. The cycle slows now. Water moves faster than in the days of our fathers. Our memories go back a long way. We have written records, but certain things we had to guess. Before we were human, long, long ago, another race dwelt in Paititi.

"That race built these castles. Men and women not of our species but akin to yours, strong and wise and happy, dwelt in this land and lived beneath the Flame. Then the Flame sank and slept."

Raft scowled.

"That race died?"

"It did not die."

"What happened to it?"

She looked away.

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"As you came through the unseen road, you must have seen a cavern there—a dark place where things crept and flew in shadow. You saw the monsters that dwelt in it. Those things—their ancestors—built this castle, and Parror's castle, and a hundred others. But as the Flame sank, they sank below the level of beasts. We know that now. But we did not always know."

Raft tried to marshal the facts. "The first race degenerated, eh? As your own evolved?"

"They degenerated long before we had the first glimmers of intelligence. I said that the Flame slept. Craddock wakened it, millions and millions of cycles ago. We know that, because our ancestors penetrated to the cave of the Flame, and found certain things there—a cloth sack, metal containers, a notebook with symbols we could not read.

"Not until da Fonseca came here, in his machine that flew, did we have any knowledge of the real truth, though we had often theorized. Parror and I took da Fonseca and through him learned the contents of that notebook."

"Millions of cycles? Craddock isn't that old!"

"The tides of time are altered in Paititi," Janissa said. "Craddock awakened the Flame, and our race was given birth. Now the Flame sinks, and that means great evil."

DAN CRADDOCK! How much did he really know about the man, Raft wondered. For thirty years the Welshman had wandered the Amazon Basin. Why? Because of some secret he had stumbled on, long ago?

"What is this Flame?" he asked.

Janissa made a curious symbolic gesture. "It is the giver of life and the taker-away of life. It is Curupuri."

Raft stared at her. "All right, leave that, then. What do you want?"

The eyes shaded to purple again. "I am of royal blood. In the old days there were once three kings, enemies. They fought, and two were conquered. But the two vanquished kings were not shamed. They were given the hereditary honor of guardians of the Flame. They dwelt, after that, in the castle Parror holds now, while the conqueror dwelt in this place, by Doirada Gulf. It was so for generations. Until now!"

She seemed to bristle.

"Parror uses me—uses me! And I am of blood no less royal than his own. I held the secret of the lens, which he needed, but now that he has Craddock, he can waken the Flame, and I will be stripped of my birthright." Her eyes glowed. "Holding the castle of the Flame is a trust. We guard. Parror intends to break the trust, and act on his own, without waiting for the king's decision. That will be a shameful thing. It will bring shame on me, one of the guardians."

"Yet you helped him murder da Fonseca," Raft said. "You helped him kidnap Craddock."

"As for the murder, I did not know he intended that. The spell of the mirror can be broken, but it must be done slowly, carefully, or the victim will die. I had no love for da Fonseca, yet I did not want his death, and I would have stopped Parror could I have done so.

"Craddock—well, Parror lied to me. He told me he would do no more than bring Craddock here. I would not have trusted his word alone, but he gave me logic I could not deny. False logic, I know now. For he will get the knowledge he needs from Craddock's brain, and waken the Flame. That—that—" She hesitated. "It may be a very great sin: I am no longer sure what is the right way, Brian."

"Well, one way is for me to get out of here and see Craddock," Raft said practically.

"I cannot get you out—yet," she told him. "But the rest is easy. I have the mirror. See?" She drew the little lens from her bosom and held it out. Raft, remembering da Fonseca, found himself instinctively glancing away.

Janissa laughed softly.

"There's no harm in it, unless the psychic cleavage is violent. Look into my mirror."

"Not so fast," Raft said. "How does it work?"

"We know much of the mind," Janissa said. "The device is—is a mental bridge. Once it has caught the matrix of a man's mind, it can be put en rapport with that man. Each brain has a different basic vibration. You could not use the mirror alone, Brian, for it needs a trained mind to direct. But with my aid, you can. Look."

He obeyed. In the tiny lens the gray storm-clouds misted and swirled. They were driven aside. Tiny and alive, Raft saw the face of Dan Craddock.

He had a stubbly white beard. His eyes

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were bloodshot, and he looked utterly exhausted. Beyond him Raft could make out vague outlines. Silks, he thought, of many colors.

"He is alone, and resting," Janissa whispered. "So you may speak with him freely."

"Speak?"

"In the mind. Look closer now, while I summon him."

Raft stared down at the lens. He saw Craddock's gaze lift, and sudden awareness spring into them.

Raft heard his name!

He did not hear it. He sensed the impact of Craddock's thought. Abruptly he was conscious of nothing but his friend's presence. The room about him darkened and vanished. There was present only the odd feeling that Janissa was here, somewhere, alive and guiding.

"Dan. Are you all right?" His thought formed words.

"All right, Brian. Yes. You?"

"So far I'm alive, anyway," Raft thought grimly. "Janissa's here."

"Good. She managed to tell me a little. And Parror's told me more."

"Is he—has he tried any tricks?"

CRADDOCK grinned wanly.

"More or less. He's the most dangerous altruist I've ever met. You shouldn't have come after me, Brian."

"You should have told me the set-up back in the hospital, when Parror first showed up," Raft pointed out. "But that's water under the bridge. What we've got to figure on now—"

"I didn't know," Craddock interrupted. "When Parror brought da Fonseca to the hospital, I hadn't the least idea what was going on. When he showed me my notebook, I was—well, as flabbergasted as I looked."

"You were here before, though."

"Yes. I was here. Thirty years ago by our time, a hundred million, maybe, by Paititi's time. For it's variable. There's the flame. . ."

"Tell him," Janissa's thought urged.

Craddock nodded.

"Yes, I—I'd better, I suppose. Though thirty years ago I hadn't much idea what I was getting into. I was pretty young. I was on the trail of the secret medicines the Indio witch-doctors were supposed to have around here, and that's how I stumbled on the unseen road. It wasn't closed then. It lay wide open. A trap, as it proved."

"A trap?"

"One set by fate," Craddock thought grimly. "I went on, though, past the cavern of the monsters, and to the place where the road forks. One branch leads to Paititi. The other leads to the thing the Indios call Curupuri."

"The Flame," Raft supplemented. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Radiant energy of some kind. It may be alive. It may not. But certainly it's nothing that ever was spawned on this earth. Paititi's a meteoric crater, Brian, and I think Curupuri came to this planet in a meteor. Perhaps it was the meteor. It's—life."

"The creator and the destroyer," Janissa put in quietly.

"Destroyer? Yes. There are forms of energy we know nothing about. Sometimes we see them through telescopes, in the giant nebulae light-years away. The stuff of primal energy, spawned in interstellar space, where that tremendous force can safely exist. It can't exist—safely—on a planet. Not unless the planet is still gaseous, still molten. Curupuri, the thing that fell on Brazil in a meteor ages ago, is a source of life, Brian."

"A living thing?"

"Too colossal for us to conceive of or measure. You know the Arrhennius theory, that life reached Earth in the form of spores, drifting through space on light-pressure tides. Well, that's fair enough, but what gave life to those spores?

"It's the old chicken or the egg problem, with a difference. The spores may have been the dust, the waste-products of things like the nebulae. Or that vast force raging in space may have had power to create life in dust, a galaxy away. I don't know. I'm theorizing, that's all. But radiant energy, vibration, power—they're tied up with it, somehow."

Craddock's tired face brightened.

"And the merest fraction of that energy fell on Earth once, in a meteor. It must have been a microscopic amount, for anything more would have devastated the planet. Growth, unchecked. I guessed some of that, and learned a little more, from records I found in Paititi."

"Records? Left by whom?"

"I didn't know then. There was no one in the valley, no life except birds and insects, peccary, tapir, and the jaguars. Re-

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member the jaguars, Brian. They're important. Meanwhile, I found those records in what is now Parror's castle.

"They weren't unlike the written Indio language. I suppose that's where the Indios got their lingo in the first place. Anyway, I found out the truth. Curupuri had given life to Paititi. The merest touch of that energy has made the Amazon Basin the most fertile and prolific place on Earth."

Raft nodded.

"Keep going. How does this trick work?"

"In cycles. There are cycles in suns, giants and dwarfs, and in nebulae too, though our lives are too short to comprehend them. When the Flame is at full tide, a certain type of energy pours forth from it. The result is peculiar."

"Time is speeded up?"

SLOWLY Craddock shook his head. "No. Not objectively. What happens is a metabolic change. The rate of growth is tremendously increased. Not only in men, in mammals, but in all living things. When the Flame is at the top of its cycle, a man may be born, live a complete life, and die in one second. Yet it will be a lifetime to him.

"Inanimate things are not affected, of course. The radiation won't make stone crumble faster. It influences living cells only. The animal world, and plants. That is what happened."

"The Flame wakened," Janissa supplemented. "And in its light all things sprang to life."

"Yes. Long ago. But that cycle was more normal. The First Race, the one that built these castles, lived here, evolved, and—and then the Flame sank. They did not die. But apparently the radiation is a false stimulus.

"When the Flame's power falls below a certain level, its rays are actively malignant. Cellular tissue may be stimulated, but it can also become cancerous. When the Flame sinks, there is a retrogression. It's freakish. It's—horrible."

"I saw what was left of the First Race," Raft mentioned. "Those monsters in the cavern."

"Yes. They saw their fate coming, and made plans. They were skilled scientists. They found a way to rekindle the Flame before its cycle had been run, but they failed to do it. Because it was dangerous. If they were not accurate to a hair's breath, if they failed to control the Flame exactly, it would mean total destruction. The radiation would rage out unchecked. The Flame would devour itself instantly, but in that instant Paititi would be seared lifeless."

"They didn't do it, then."

"No. They waited. Each generation thought it could live out its own span. Each generation let the problem go on to its children. And the children thought the same. In the end, the beast-minds were too dull to comprehend.

"The creatures that had been the First Race remembered only the Flame, and they found their way to the cavern where you saw them. Their nearness to the radiation keeps them alive, and they've lived and bred there in the dark for a long time."

Raft frowned.

"But the cat-people. How did they come into being?"

Craddock's eyes held a touch of deep horror.

"I created them. I—wakened the Flame."

CHAPTER VIII

Kharn, The Terrible

VISUALIZING that scene of thirty years ago, Raft could picture a younger Craddock lost in wonder before the secrets he had uncovered, feeling a dangerous exaltation burning in his mind, and, of all the world, the only man who knew of that tremendous, intergalactic Force that blazed hidden in the jungles. Yes, he could understand why Craddock might have been tempted to meddle with forbidden forces.

"I wakened the Flame. The records I had found, they told the way. I couldn't understand all of it, but I understood enough. Too much. That was when—" Craddock held up his maimed hands—

"I succeeded and I failed," Craddock continued. "For the Flame wakened raging with power, too much power, though it was far beneath its—maximum. I was lucky to escape as I did."

The worn face held horror again.

"Against that flaming terror I watched my hands change. I saw the living flesh alter. I saw human tissues writhe and blacken into something that was—was a blasphemy, Brian. Even as I ran, I could feel those—things—where my fingers had been. I could feel

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them—writhing!"

He drew a deep breath, went on more steadily.

"I escaped into the jungle, and there I amputated—those horrors. I had my surgical kit. There wasn't sulfa in those days, but I managed. I thought then I'd never go back to Paititi. My career was ruined, of course; my hands were—not hands.

"Yet something kept me in the Amazon Basin. I was too close to the Flame once; part of it touched me, and I could never leave Brazil after that. Sometimes I thought I could hear Curupuri in the Jutahy drums."

He nodded.

"Then I did hear it, after thirty years. Parror brought something of the Flame with him when he came down the river, and the Indios sensed it. That incredible vitality sent its message through the jungle. When I saw Parror for the first time, in the hospital, I felt that same life-energy I had found in Paititi. It was faint, but I couldn't mistake it. I was afraid.

"Parror came to me in the laboratory and gave me my notebook. He'd traced me through that. There's the woods-telegraph, and he knew my name. He'd left Paititi on a crazy chance, hoping I was still alive, hoping to find me.

"And he succeeded. He told me I must come back to Paititi with him, and of course I said no. Then you came along the hospital hall."

"I remember," Raft nodded. "But you were alone in the lab."

"Remember Parror's faster metabolism. He could move at tremendous speed when he wanted to, in our slower world. He had to restrict himself and do everything in slow motion when we were watching. He simply ran out so fast you couldn't see him. Later, he hypnotized me with his mirror. Though I knew what I was doing, I couldn't help myself. Not till I woke here in his castle. Now I know the truth, but I'm helpless."

"What is the truth? You mean the cat-people evolved in thirty years from primitives?"

"From the jaguars of the valley," Craddock supplemented. "But it was not merely thirty years. Thirty million or billion, with the radiations pouring out from the Flame. Remember I told you a man could live a lifetime in a second? What took place in our world over a period of eons, happened in Paititi in three decades. The metabolism, the life-rate, was speeded up so enormously that the jaguars evolved in hours or days to savages. And thence to reasoning beings. Their paws became hands.

"They learned to walk upright. If we could have looked down on Paititi from above, in those times, we would have seen the shapes actually flowing, living flesh melting and changing." He paused, glancing at his hands.

"Yes," he went on, after a time. "The cat-people evolved and became intelligent. They created a culture of their own based on the older culture that had preceded them. The other life-forms in the valley reached dead ends. Only one species becomes dominant in any milieu. Here it was the cat.

"Only lately, the Flame has begun to sink again. When I wakened it, I gave it an artificial stimulus, and its flare-up will die as swiftly. In another generation or two, it will sink beneath the danger-level, and then the malignant radiations that destroyed the First Race will come pouring out."

QUICKLY Raft sucked in his breath. "I see. I'm getting it now, finally."

"Yes. That's why Parror abducted me. Because the records of the First Race that held the secret of the Flame no longer exist. I left them in the cavern then, and they were destroyed by that horror. As I would have been destroyed if I'd stayed longer. Parror thought I knew how to waken the Flame."

"Don't you?"

"I could not understand all the records," Craddock admitted. "I told you that. I can waken the Flame, but I can't control it. That's the danger."

"Not even Parror will risk that," Janissa suggested. "Until he finds the knowledge he seeks, he won't take chances."

Craddock gestured urgently. "Someone is coming. Parror, I think."

Janissa touched the mirror. "We can speak no more, then, until he is gone. But tell him nothing, Craddock."

"How can I?" the man asked. Then gray clouds blotted out his face.

Raft leaned back, realizing that he was sweating and exhausted. Janissa watched him sympathetically.

"It is not an easy road unless you know the way," she told him. "But it is a road we must take again."

"Yeah. I'd like to get my hands on Parror personally. Or see him in my rifle-sights."

"Perhaps you will, later." The cat-face

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was somber. "You see, there is still danger. Craddock did not understand all the old records, but he read them."

"So?"

"The memory is in his mind. It is forgotten now, hidden away, but it is not lost. Such memories can be recovered. And if they are, Parror will know how to use the wisdom of the First Race."

"He can dig up Craddock's memories, eh? Mnemonics—hypnosis, I suppose."

"Not easily." The girl looked troubled. "He is working on a device that will aid him."

Raft's lips tightened. "But if he succeeds, he'll try to waken the Flame?"

"He will, and there is the peril," Janissa said. "The First Race supposedly learned how to control Curupuri, but their experiment was never performed. How do we know they found the answer?"

"We don't."

Janissa moved uneasily.

"It may mean destruction. The Flame unchecked, raging through Paititi. Many of us think as the First Race did, that we can live our lives safely, and let our children make the test. But the Flame sinks fast. The waters run more swiftly than in the old days. We do not know when the danger-level will be reached. And—and the king has not yet decided."

"Which side does he favor?"

"Who knows?" she asked, shrugging. "We cannot read Darum's mind. Many in Paititi want freedom to live as they always have. They are willing to procrastinate rather than risk extinction. But there are others who think differently.

"I, for one, do not know, Brian. I know only this: I have my trust. I am of royal blood, and must guard the Flame. Against Parror if need be! When the king decides, I'll obey him. Meanwhile, Craddock has the answer locked in his brain. An answer that may mean death or life."

Raft stared toward the open window and the cloudy veil that hung above the great deep beyond. His voice was low.

"There's one thing, Janissa. I'm in this game now. I don't know quite where I'll fit, but I'm not just a spectator any more." His eyes hardened. "I don't like being pushed around. Darum—Parror—even you—have been treating Craddock and me like chessmen. And there wasn't much we could do about it, because we didn't know the answers."

She watched him unblinkingly. He went on.

"We were dragged into this. What we want most is to get out, back to our own world. If you'll help us, we'll help you. So let me tell you this straight. You don't mind if Parror gets the secret of controlling the Flame, but you don't want him to use it. Not without the king's permission. Right?"

"That's correct."

"Fine. Then it's simply a matter of convincing Darum that I'm Brian Raft. He had me captured because he thought I was Craddock."

HER green eyes flashed. "Darum has left the castle, with a band of soldiers. I've learned that."

"Then he believed me! He went to get Craddock himself." Raft hesitated. No, he realized, the king had not taken his word for the substitution. Instead, Darum was investigating the possibility, cutting the Gordian knot of uncertainty by going directly to

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the source—Parror.

"Parror is resourceful," Janissa said. "I don't know. . ." She shook her head, the soft curls stirring with her movement.

"Well, what am I supposed to do? Sit here waiting till Darum gets back?"

The girl pondered.

"Let me use the mirror again," she said at last. She took out the tiny lens, bending her head to stare intently into those cloudy depths. Raft saw her start.

"What's wrong?"

"Wait." She held up a warning hand. "It is difficult to get through. There's a barrier. . ."

She straightened, thrusting the mirror back into her dress.

"Craddock is tranced," she said. "Not the spell of the mirror, but a kind of hypnosis. Parror is taking him somewhere—I can't see where. But they have left the castle."

Raft bit at his lower lip. "Can't you communicate with Craddock at all?"

"I can catch only a few stray thoughts. Not much."

"Can you find out where they're going? Try again, Janissa. If we could discover that, it might help."

She took out the lens, bent above it in an agony of concentration. Raft saw diamonds of perspiration glittering on her forehead.

"It's hard. His mind is veiled."

"Try!"

She let the mirror drop, amazement in her eyes. "No. Kharn—no! He'd never go there!"

Raft gripped the girl's slim arms. "Kharn? Is that where the Flame is?"

Janissa drew away, shivering.

"Oh, no. I thought he might take the unseen road, but to go to Kharn. He must have some method of protection I know nothing about. Or else it's suicide."

"What is Kharn? Where is it?"

"At the source of the great river," she said. "The river that flows here, under Doirada Castle. That is Kharn. But no man goes there."

"Why not?"

Janissa seemed to draw inward into herself.

"The Garden of Kharn has life which isn't like ours. There are beings in Kharn who are—I don't know what. I've never been in the Garden. But I've been near it, though. I've felt something reaching out to touch my mind, something cold and crawling and deadly."

Raft uttered a harsh laugh.

"I'd be willing to face any ghost if I had my rifle back."

"Kharn is unhealthy," the girl said quietly. "If Parror has found a way to protect himself against the Garden, he's wiser than I thought. But I fear for Craddock."

"Why? Parror will take mighty good care of Dan Craddock, till he gets the information he wants. Apparently this Kharn is taboo. Which is fine for Parror. He can take his time getting the information he wants."

A change had come over Janissa.

"This alters things, Brian. When Darum reaches Parror's castle, he'll find Parror gone. But if he knew his quarry goes to Kharn, he might intercept him, if he goes fast." She rose to her feet in a lithe, smooth motion. "Yes, this changes the face of our plans. I must get to Darum and warn him."

"I'll go with you," Raft said.

"No, you cannot. You couldn't leave by my path." She waved toward the window. "And there are guards outside the door."

"I can take care of them."

"You are not that strong. I must move fast, and alone."

Raft caught her arm as she moved away. "At least tell me how to open that door!"

THE elfin face smiled up at him maliciously.

"Lay your hand on the brightest spot of light. But you'd better wait here for my return, Brian. A door sometimes has more than one lock."

They were on the balcony now, and Janissa swung a slim leg over the railing.

"You'll be back?" Raft said.

"I promise."

"Her mind is like the wind," Darum had said. How much could Raft trust this cat-girl of an alien species?

He gripped her arms hard. He drew her toward him. That slim, strong body tensed in revolt, but Raft's mouth came down hard and covered hers.

After a moment he let her go. There was a touch of mockery in his eyes now.

"At least, you may not find it so easy to forget now," he said.

Janissa touched her lips with questioning fingers. She stared at him.

"No," she said enigmatically. "I shall not forget—that."

She slipped over the balustrade and was gone, writhing to avoid the keen blades,

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clinging precariously to the face of the stone. Raft watched her descend till her figure vanished around a turret. Then, still undecided, he returned to his luxurious prison.

He had solved nothing.

He had learned a great deal, but nothing that could be of immediate use. Except—he nodded—the key to the door. That might be of very real help. Unless he wanted to sit here quietly until Janissa or the king returned.

He found a heavy metal statuette, wrapped it in a silken scarf, and went to the door. He stared at the translucent panel, seeing now that glowing flecks of light moved slowly within the oval, like pallid moon-flames caught in a lazy current.

The brightest spot of light.

He found it and laid his palm over its glow. But nothing happened. The fleck slid from under his hand. He tried again, with no result.

A door has more than one lock. That was what she had meant, then. Smiling sourly, Raft tossed his weapon away and returned to the balcony.

Janissa had descended, but he could not follow her. He had no illusions on that score. Nor would any rope he might improvise reach to firm footing. He bent and tried to break off one of the swords. All he accomplished was the wounding of a finger.

Raft swore softly and savagely. After that he felt a little better. He dropped on a pile of cushions and tried to plan. It was difficult. What he wanted, obviously, was to get out of Paititi and take Craddock with him. The way to do that—what was the method?

He knew the road out. Once back in the Amazon jungle, he'd take his chance, even without a rifle. But escaping wouldn't solve Raft's problems now.

The amulets, Parror's, and the one taken by the king. They, apparently, gave the possessor power to live outside Paititi, to slow down the metabolism to a speed normal to life beyond the valley's cliffs. But the effects were variable. Back in the hospital, Parror had once moved too fast for human eyes to observe.

Suppose, then, Raft thought, he and Craddock managed to escape. They might reach the Jutahy. They might get a week's start, or a month's. But in a day pursuers from Paititi could overtake them. With the aid of the amulets, Parror or the king could flash through the jungle in pursuit, and kill or hypnotize with Janissa's trick mirror. And back he and Craddock would go to Paititi.

So he was up against a dead end there.

It was difficult to judge time. The sun didn't move appreciably, and the second-hand on his watch went so slowly he couldn't see its progress. He was living at an abnormally increased rate of speed here, which meant that in Paititi he was on more nearly equal terms with the cat-people. Once outside, that slight advantage would be instantly lost, as his metabolism slowed to its former rate.

The psychology of a feline race—that might be the answer. . . .

Raft was lost in thought for a long time. He roused when the panel opened to admit not Vann, but a guard and a page with a food-cart. After the meal he again fell into his reverie. It should be night now, but the days in this land would be as long as the nights, abnormally long.

Basically the people of Paititi were feline, as he was of simian stock. Monkeys are curious. The instinct of curiosity is strong in the human race. But cats lose interest quickly. They are not builders. They had taken possession of these castles, reared long ago by the mysterious First Race, and renovated. Cats were essentially hedonists. But the factor of intelligence was a strong influence, and one whose strength Raft could not estimate.

Could he base any plans on rules of logic, in a land where the human factor was so alien to his own experience? A race of cats might have unpredictable reactions. . . .

Low, urgent, warning, a wordless murmur whispered softly from across the room.

CHAPTER IX

Assassin's Plot

RAFT was on his feet facing the doorway before those last echoes had died. The translucent oval was open now, the way of escape clear. But barring his path was a figure, veiled in soft grays, her face hidden, and both loveliness and horror breathed out from beneath the shrouding veils.

Her hands, slim, pale, were bare, and held an instrument unfamiliar to Raft, though he had heard it before. Again the white fingers moved across intricate strings and keys.

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Once more the music breathed out. More urgent now, summoning him.

"Yrann?" Raft said questioningly. The shrouded head bowed once. He stepped forward.

"The guard?"

Yrann beckoned. She turned toward that inviting portal, and Raft was at her heels, but warily. The corridor outside held no menace.

The guard was standing motionless. He did not turn his head. By the door, he stood frozen, his eyes wide, staring at a milky, glittering little sphere on the floor at his feet.

Raft's eyes were drawn to that globe. Colors were moving and coiling slowly beneath its surface. It was growing larger. . . .

The soft, urgent strings roused him. Yrann moved forward, bending to lift the sphere and hide it in her veils. The spell snapped. But the guard, Raft saw, still was motionless.

He pointed to the man and raised his brows questioningly. The music sounded reassuring, somehow.

"The guard will not wake. Not for a while. *The spell holds him.*"

Raft noticed that the oval door had closed behind him. Yrann was beckoning again. Which meant exactly what? Treachery? Perhaps. The cat people were unpredictable. But, at least, it was better than sitting in his prison waiting, and Raft felt quite able to protect himself against a woman.

He followed her along the corridor.

She took a circuitous route, Raft thought. They met no one, with the exception of a page who came hurrying toward them from the distance. Instantly Yrann pressed Raft aside, into a shelter behind a velvet tapestry. The page passed unsuspiciously, bowing to Yrann as he went. Then, after a moment, the journey was resumed.

It ended before another hanging that Yrann thrust aside, urging Raft through and letting the drape fall again. Now that familiar dim light—or, rather, absence of it—made Raft close his eyes briefly. There was utter silence.

Through the stillness Yrann's music sang. Her fingers dwelt on his arm.

She guided him forward, making no misstep even in this vague gloom. Swiftly they approached the silk-heaped dais where the king had sat.

The shrouded form beside him began sending out emanations which were curiously ominous.

"What is it, Yrann?" Raft said. "What do you want?"

The oboe murmured, the strings twanged, and there was something evil in the minor notes that sounded.

The music held malignance.

Yrann touched the cushions of the dais reflectively. Her hand lingered on the softness where Darum's body had lain. Then again that cool, wordless song whispered evilly, with a conspiratoral secrecy about it. It was heavy with suggestion.

Yrann turned toward the back of he dais. Curtains hung there. She held one aside, beckoning till Raft came to her side. Gently she guided him to a little alcove in the wall.

She pressed something into his hand. And stepped back, letting the curtain drop.

Wait, the music said. Wait now.

He was in utter darkness. But he knew what it was that he held. His free hand investigated cautiously. And recoiled from vicious, razor-sharp metal.

He pulled at the curtain. Yrann's harp-oboe shrilled sharp warning. The velvet fell back.

Then soft footsteps fading into stillness. A rustle. He sensed that Yrann had gone.

But he knew unmistakably now why she had brought him here.

WORKING his lips as though he tasted something unpleasant, Raft leaned back against the wall. Yrann had helped him, if only for her own purposes. Now the idea was to get out of the castle, somehow.

On the curtain before him a ghostly, pale movement was visible. His eyes had adjusted now, and he could make out a shadow, man-shaped, cast on the fabric—the shadow of a man whose hand held a long-bladed dagger.

His own shadow. He turned. Behind him was no wall, but one of the familiar oval doors. But its glow was dimmed, and the crawling flecks of light were very faint.

He located the brightest one and laid his hand upon it.

The oval panel lifted and was gone. Instantly a blaze of light dazzled him.

His weapon ready, Raft waited, blinking. But there was nothing alive in the room before him. Only a fantastic glitter of brightness and shining metals, a richness of flamboyant color that contrasted strangely with the gloom of the chamber behind him.

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Struck by a new thought, he stepped back, through the curtain, and swung it into place. The material was opaque. No hint of light filtered through. If Yrann, or anyone else, entered, his hiding-place would not be betrayed by an oval glow on the dark hanging.

Satisfied on that score, Raft again entered what he saw to be Darum's treasure-vault.

If he expected a hoard of gold and diamonds, he was disappointed. There were diamonds, highly polished and many-faceted, but they seemed to hold equal place with quartz crystals that were used for the same purpose of jewelry and decoration. There was metal here, curious alloys in which hints of rainbow colors rippled, like oil on water. And weapons, many weapons.

The blades were of good quality, which was to be expected, for manganese, beryllium, and chromium were found in Brazil. There must be deposits of the elements here in Paititi. Certainly there was silver, for delicately shaped and engraved vases of it, burnished and shining, were set in a row around the walls.

It was the loot of a strangely alien civilization. Some of the objects the cat people found beautiful were ugly to Raft's eyes. One set of very plain, sleek metals reminded him of Brancusis. His gaze followed arcs and curves that were curiously satisfying and oddly suggestive, though he realized he could probably never completely understand the principles that underlay the art-forms of this race.

There were more utilitarian objects. Many of them were dueling-gloves, with their razor-keen triple talons curving out viciously from the fingers. Raft picked up one of these, jeweled and ornate, and drew it on his hand. The claws ran the full length of his fingers, he found, and instinctively his hand tensed and curved.

Encrusted as it was with gems, the glove could be used as a handy substitute for brass knuckles. Which would probably shock the cat people, Raft thought sardonically, as he slipped the gauntlet into a capacious pocket he had discovered in his garments.

There were a number of maps, engraved in metal, and jewel-framed, too heavy to be portable, but interesting. One seemed to show Paititi. Raft could make nothing of the symbols, but he located Parror's castle, and the great gulf into which the torrent poured.

Thoughtfully he traced the river back to its source, where a tiny ring of zircons surrounded a few cryptic markings. The Garden of Kharn, eh? Where Parror was heading, with his captive Craddock.

Another map showed the castle itself, and was made with a dozen thin metal sheets that lifted on hinges. Raft studied this closely. What he wanted was a way out. Unfortunately, he found orientation difficult, until he managed to identify his own prison apartment. After that, it was easier.

Finally he drew back, nodding. Yes, he thought he could find his way now.

Yrann's music came urgently to his ears.

Raft whirled toward the door. Nothing. But the song kept on, warning, shrill.

He moved forward. The shape of a familiar object on a shelf caught his glance.

IT WAS a revolver, a small, ornate weapon of mother-of-pearl and silver filigree. Beside it lay a heap of cartridges. Raft swept the cartridges into his pocket and lifted the gun, staring at the initials on the butt. TDF —Thomaz da Fonseca, the aviator who had crashed in Paititi. His revolver, then.

It was not Raft's own heavy, powerful Colt, but it was far better than a dagger. He slipped his finger through the guard, saw that it was unloaded, and deftly thrust shells into the chamber. Then he stepped across the threshold and waited, his hand on the curtain before him.

Yrann's music had changed. It was softer now, welcoming. But under it ran a counterpoint of menace, a soft susurrus of treachery and evil.

"Parror had escaped me, Yrann," the king's low voice said. "There was another man from outside in his castle, I found traces. But they are gone. We could find no tracks."

The wordless song was questioning.

"They are still in Paititi. I had guards at the gate to the unseen road. Parror will not get at the Flame till I am willing. Nevertheless, I do not know where he is, now."

Tenderness breathed across the strings—and hidden hatred.

Darum sighed.

"I was ready. I was ready for anything I might find. I even thought Parror might take the unseen road to outside, and I was ready to pursue him even there. But how can I find him when he has vanished with this other man?"

Raft rubbed his jaw reflectively. He knew where Parror had gone. If he told the king,

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would that help?

Yrann played lightly, and now slumber breathed out from the hollow crying of the pipes.

"Yes," the king said. "Yes, there is always this, Yrann. The world does not come into our chamber here." He sighed. "There is nothing here but our love."

Sleep, the music said. Sleep, my lover and my king. Only sleep—and wake no more.

But Darum sensed no menace. His breathing grew quieter. Drowsiness crept through the curtain, taking Raft in a warm embrace. Yrann's music was magic.

Dark magic, Raft thought angrily. He shook his head savagely.

After a time Yrann's arm crept through the soft barrier, touching Raft, pulling him forward. The glare of light from behind him struck full on Yrann's face—or what should have been a face. With a wordless sound she pulled her veil in place. Raft felt her gaze go from him to the treasure chamber. But the harp was silent. It asked no question.

The curtain remained looped back, and the light struck out to the dais, where Darum lay asleep, his face relaxed and peaceful. He stirred uneasily. Yrann's fingers rippled across the strings, and the king was silent once more.

Yrann touched the little revolver hesitantly. Then she pulled the dagger from Raft's belt, where he had placed it, and thrust it into his hand. She pushed him forward, pointing to the dais.

Raft halted. The veiled face was lifted to his. He shook his head slowly and emphatically.

"No," he said under his breath. "Even if that would save my life, I don't think I could do it."

Yrann's hand poised over the harp-strings, somehow threateningly. The tableau held for a moment. Then she must have seen that he meant what he said. She made a dreadful snarling sound deep in her throat and snatched the dagger from Raft's grip, whirling toward the sleeping king. Her draperies swirled as she bent and plucked at Darum's shirt, tearing the thin silk open. Darum murmured and stirred in his music-drugged sleep. Yrann swung the dagger high, poised it.

Raft's reaction was instinctive. He had begun his leap forward before he saw what gleamed upon the king's bared chest, something square and shining, on a silver chain. Something that seemed to give out light that quivered like the pulse of life itself.

The amulet!

There was no time to examine it. There was no time to ask questions and be sure.

But Raft had an inner certainty which needed no confirmation. A man could not look upon that shaking gleam and not recognize it.

WITH one hand Raft snatched at the amulet. The chain snapped under his violent pull. With the other he seized Yrann's as her knife began to plunge downward. She snarled again and bent like a bow against him, fighting hard for the weapon.

They swayed together beside the couch, battling in desperate silence. The harp crashed to the floor. A string broke with a ringing snap. On the couch Darum sat up dizzily, peering at the dimly seen figures reeling before him.

Then with a suddenness that made Raft stagger, Yrann released the knife. She sprang back, stooping to snatch up the harp. Her fingers swept across it, dragging a wild discord of alarm from the strings.

Waken! Beware!

Loud with ringing urgency, the music crashed against the walls. The king struggled up, shaking his head, crying out confused questions. But he was caught in the shaft of light from the treasure room, and could see Raft as no more than a shadow—a shadow, and a glint of threatening steel.

The music screamed and wailed. There was a distant sound of running feet.

Cursing under his breath, Raft whirled and raced for the door by which he had entered, praying that it was open. He swept the drapery aside, saw an open passage before him, and plunged into it. Now he was tagged as an assassin. That meant he had to escape, and fast. The king might listen to explanations, but the probability was that he wouldn't, especially since they involved Yrann.

The map he had seen burned in Raft's mind. If he got off the track once, he knew he was lost. There should be another branching corridor here, at about this point.

He dodged into it, but did not slacken his pace. The sound of distant, aroused voices gave him warning. He gripped the revolver tighter. It would be more useful than the

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dagger. As for Yrann, he knew now what she had intended. If necessary, she would have killed Darum herself, and put the blame on Raft. Which was thoroughly human as well as feline.

Twice he hid behind curtains while guards raced past. Once he stopped, not breathing, before an oval door, wondering what lay beyond. It led to escape, he knew, but there might be soldiers behind it.

There were. Shadows showed against the panel. Raft turned silently and raced back, knowing he was lost now. Unless another way opened up before him, which wasn't likely.

He turned into another passage, where windows stood open in one wall. Glancing out, he found himself staring, not into the Gulf of Doirada, but at the river, where it curved in and finally poured over the edge of an arched opening, beneath the castle.

Beyond the mossy plain loomed the enormous pillars of the forest, sanctuary if he could reach it. But the river lay far below, and was flowing too fast. It would sweep him into the abyss, if its rush gripped him.

Too fast?

Not in Paititi, where the metabolism of all living things was speeded up so enormously. For all its power, the waters below glided past so smoothly, so gently, he might have been watching the gentle boiling of a cloud-river.

Raft thrust the revolver into his pocket, closing over it a fastening. The contrivance sealed it tightly, which indicated the pocket might be waterproof. That would help. Raft gave a quick glance to left and right. He saw no one, though the sounds of pursuit were louder.

Then he climbed into the window-frame, two hundred feet above that molten silver cataract—and dived.

CHAPTER X

Nightmare Garden

ONE thing Raft had forgotten, and the fantastic thing was that he had time to remember it as he fell. The rate of speed of a freely falling body does not vary. Friction of air has some effect, but very little when an object weighing a hundred and sixty pounds, in the form of a man, drops free.

Raft's metabolism had been tremendously accelerated by the radiation that pervaded Paititi. He was living far faster than in his own world. And he had seen immense boulders float down lightly as feathers from the towering cliffs.

To his own mind, he did not fall. He dropped gently as in an elevator, utterly stunned with surprise, so astonished was he that the truth did not strike him immediately. When it did, there was nothing he could do about it.

Gently he revolved as he drifted down. Beside him the wall of the castle slipped past. At any moment someone might come out on a balcony and see him. A thrown spear would be dangerous. It could be thrown sufficiently fast to impale him, since the wielder could easily gauge the rate of Raft's fall.

He had never felt so helpless and naked in his life. It was like hanging free and unsupported in interplanetary space. He had time for a hundred questions and fears to pass through his mind before, finally, with agonizing slowness, his body struck the waters of the torrent.

His mass was the same, and he sank, angling slowly in the direction of the current. But he was breathing perhaps a hundred times faster than normal, so there was a new danger. Under ordinary conditions he could have held his breath until he reached the surface. As it was he might not emerge above the water for five minutes!

Now the accelerated metabolism was helpful. Raft managed to turn and swim up, though it was like moving in glue, against that slow, inexorable thrust of driving waters. He was a fly drowning in syrup. But the fly reached the surface at last.

Under ordinary conditions he would have been swept over the brink into Doirada Gulf, but his stimulated time-sense fought the slow pressure of the water. He fought his way upstream. He dragged himself to a shallow pool and collapsed, gasping.

There was no time to rest yet, though. He was not yet out of range of pursuit. Nor did he think he could cross the clearing to where the forest began without being spotted.

Wildly he stared about him, searching for a hiding place.

Reeds grew thickly about the margin of the pool. The water itself was roiled with thick mud, and opaque. Raft found a hol-

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low reed, tested it, and made use of an old trick. He simply lay down in the water, anchoring himself by gripping embedded rocks, and breathed through the improvised lifeline.

He could not see, but he could not be seen, either. The cat people might discover his hiding-place, of course. Yet the chance was worth taking, Raft thought, remembering the difference between feline and simian psychology.

The pursuers would expect him—as a descendant of simians—to depend on flight, and probably to head for the forest. They would themselves be too fastidious to hide in dirty water if any other way of escape opened, and automatically might expect Raft to think in the same manner. If so, they would be mistaken.

His eyes shut, Raft concentrated on breathing. It was not too easy.

The amulet—could that help him now? It contained a spark from the Flame, from the tremendous energy-source called Cururpuri. And it had the property of lowering the metabolic rate, somehow.

If, instead, it accelerated metabolism, Raft would have been more satisfied. It might actually do that, but that seemed improbable.

The sparks, probably, were keyed to the original Flame, kept powered by induction, unless they were each complete in themselves, like a speck of radium. To decelerate would mean that Raft would become the equivalent of a living statue among enemies moving like flashes of lightning.

Anyhow, the amulet was in his sealed pocket, and could not be secured without ruining da Fonseca's revolver. It was something to be investigated later. There was nothing to do now but play possum, and wait.

SO RAFT waited, while the chill of the river crept stealthily into his flesh, numbing nerves and muscles. He forced himself to wait, unhitching his mind till he seemed to float in a vacuum where neither light nor sound existed, nothing save the slow, jellied motion of the current in the pool. He couldn't afford to wait for nightfall. It might be several weeks, to his timesense, before the sun dropped out of sight.

There were, Raft thought wryly, certain handicaps to a land where metabolism had gone so fantastically haywire.

Anyway, Darum had not caught Parror. That arrogant individual had taken Craddock to Kharn, which lay at the source of this very river. What lay in the Garden of Kharn, Raft hadn't the slightest idea. Janissa had feared it. And she wasn't easily frightened, Raft surmised. His thoughts drifted toward the girl, with her strange, dark-circled eyes and her tiger-striped hair.

For no apparent reason, he thought of Balzac, and the French writer's story, "A Passion in the Desert." Then he had the connection: a man's love for a—had it been a lioness? Or a leopard. Not a jaguar, anyway. There were no jaguars in the Sahara.

Janissa?

Feline she was, but she was human too. Though child of an alien species, she was no beast, no stalking beast of prey.

Raft caught himself.

"Good grief!" he thought. "Am I imagining I'm in love with the girl? I've seen her just twice, in the flesh. It's novelty. I'm attracted by her exotic strangeness. When I get out of here, in five years or so, maybe, I'll meet a girl from Peoria and marry her." The very term marriage made him realize the fantasy of the situation. He grinned inwardly.

"Biologically I rather imagine it's impossible. Besides, such things don't happen. I certainly wouldn't want my wife going out at night to sit on the back fence and howl."

Nevertheless the thought did not entirely leave him. The union of two races, two species, rather, had never occurred in the history of biology. He broke the problem down into basic equations of genes and chromosomes, and that passed time, but finally made him feel foolish. Eventually he was glad to raise his head warily above water and prepare to emerge.

A long time had passed, and the alarm must long since have died down. No one was visible on any of the castle's many balconies, nor could the courtyard be seen from here. But if Raft attempted to cross that open plain, he would inevitably be spotted.

He could keep to the river—though its slow, powerful current was a danger. So he set off upstream hugging as closely to the bank as he could, crawling mostly, swimming at times, and keeping the reed always ready. Once, at a suspicious flash of movement, he lay hidden, but he was overly cautious then. By the time he reached the forest, he was freezing cold and bleeding from scraped elbows and wrists.

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He hoped the cat people did not trail by scent. It was unlikely. They were a civilized race, and the dulling of certain senses is the price evolution exacts. The lower species, depending on scent and sound, have those faculties highly developed. On the other hand, man's vision is far more powerful and more easily adjustable than the vision of most beasts.

Darum would not know his destination. The closer he got to Kharn, the safer he would be from pursuit.

A cyclopean tree shut out the turrets of the castle. Raft went on cautiously for perhaps half a mile. Then he opened the sealed pocket, made sure his revolver was dry, and put the dagger into his belt. The amulet he took out for a closer inspection.

It told him nothing. A spark of fire glittered in the depths of a cloudy crystal chip that was in turn set in a thick metallic lozenge, square with rounded corners. The flat gem could, he found on experiment, be revolved like the dial of a safe. He turned it cautiously.

There was no change, except, perhaps, for a freshening of the breeze. How could he test the device?

His watch, of course.

LUCKILY the watch was waterproof. He stared at the dial, noticing that the second hand was moving very slowly. He turned the crystal on the amulet again and the pointer moved faster. Another turn, and it raced.

Which meant that his metabolism was correspondingly slower.

Would the amulet also increase the rate of life? If so, that would solve many problems. He could get to Kharn, perhaps, even before Parror arrived there. But he was doomed to disappointment on that score. The amulet could retard metabolism, but it could not increase it beyond the rate prevalent in Paititi.

That meant the spark, undoubtedly, was attuned to the Flame itself, radiating at the same energy-rate, and moving in the same cycle. Well, Raft didn't want to be handicapped by moving more slowly than the rest of his temporary world, and he adjusted the device till it was as he had found it.

He now put it in the pocket that held the revolver, and went on. He was estimating, as well as he could remember, the velocity of a bullet, and wondering if, under the current conditions, any target he fired at might be able to dodge lead.

He must remember to use the gun at close range, the closer the better!

The use of artillery would be handicapped in Paititi. If a bomb were dropped on Doirada Castle, the cat people would almost have time to dismantle the structure and move it elsewhere before the egg landed. No wonder the species fought with steel, instead of propellents. Only an energy-ray could be truly efficient here.

Which explained, Raft decided, why mental powers were so highly developed—Janissa's mirror, Yrann's hypnotic sphere. Time-lag would be minimized with such devices.

The whole inanimate part of the valley was indeed under a spell, such a one as had protected the Norse god Baldur. There could be few fatalities through accident. Not when stones floated, rivers ran like treacle, and a man fell as slowly as Alice descending the rabbit-hole!

As he went on, he paid more attention to the life around him, the curious creatures that used the gigantic trees as hiding places. In the cool, clear light he could make out new details.

The flower-bright vines, with their dangerous tentacles, slithered swiftly across the bark. There were many of the three-foot alligators, lurking in the pools they themselves seemed to have constructed on the trunks, shells that resembled the cups rubber-workers fasten to the hevea bark as they drain their milky latex.

The 'gators had surprisingly flexible claws. Raft noticed a couple of them constructing their pools, scraping resinous wood from the tree and making it into a kind of cement with a fluid they secreted from salivary glands.

Only the sloths were truly familiar, and they were all the stranger because of the rapidity with which they moved. The true sloth hangs motionless by its claws, as its tongue flashes out to reap a nutritious harvest of insects. Its metabolism is abnormally slow.

But it was not slow here.

As for the inch-long parasites that crept through the sloths' hair, Raft found those creatures too unpleasantly familiar to be truly interesting. Only their ape-like tails kept them from resembling too closely the species that was not dominant in Paititi, though it might be elsewhere.

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Most intriguing were the brown furry mammals in the apartment-house nests. They had sucking-disks on their paws, which were none too efficient, but their elongated snouts ended in tabs of flesh like the extremity of an elephant's trunk, a finger and thumb, which they used as man might use his hands. Its prehensile delicacy was amazing.

Raft wondered what the interior of the nests was like. He felt that what lay inside might be surprising.

Underfoot was only the moss. There was no underbrush. Those incredible trees seemed to have sucked all the nutriment out of the ground, leaving so little that only moss could flourish. That gave a logical explanation for the tree-parasites.

Where else could they live, except in a closely integrated society, where hunger made an automatic check-and-balance? Even the trees were part of that inexorable system, for they had drained the earth of life. And in return, they were hosts to other species.

SPECIES had reached dead end in this land. They would never evolve to dominance, as the cat people had evolved, Raft surmised. They had found their balance.

And, meanwhile, he had to find Craddock.

Keeping a wary eye out for possible pursuit, he followed the river. Never at any time could he see more than a half-mile ahead. The trees made a maze. But the river itself was a guide. Raft plunged on doggedly, until at last exhaustion forced him to rest.

There might be shelter on one of the encrusted tree-trunks, but life was too teeming there. None of the things seemed to venture to the ground, however, and Raft finally lay down on the river bank, in lieu of better shelter. He might be attacked while he slept, but there was no way of guarding against that. He laid the revolver ready and slept, hoping for the best.

When he awoke, he went on again. Nor had he far to travel now. An hour's walk, as he estimated time, brought him to a wall which blocked further progress. It was only twenty feet high, dwarfed by the trees, but it was of some age-resistant plastic or alloy, and had eroded scarcely at all.

To left and to right it stretched away and was lost amid the trees. But it was broken at one spot by an archway, through which the river poured. Sediment had built up a narrow ledge bordering the water, a precarious path that led beneath the arch.

Unhesitatingly Raft stepped out on that muddy trail. He could see faint outlines that might have been footprints, and, further along, his suspicion was confirmed when he observed a track that was unmistakably that of Craddock's heavy boots. He was very nearly at the end of the trail.

Ahead he could make out irregular vegetation darkening that hemispherical opening, blocking his vision. He went on, more carefully now. There were bushes, he noted with surprise.

He began to push through their tangled mass, and abruptly drew back, contact with the things startling him. Their texture had been unlike the rough, bristly texture of plants. They were warm.

They were not plants.

Lacy filigrees, arabesque nets of interwoven mesh, made a curtain on each side of the river. They were grayish-pink, reminding Raft unmistakably of the neutral structure of a living body, networks of nerves, raw and unpleasant. Nor were they rooted like plants.

They quivered, vibrated. They drew back to let him pass.

As he stepped forward, they drew into themselves like contracting anemones touched by an intrusive finger. A dozen grayish, irregular little balls hugged the ground, blending with it in protective camouflage.

Beyond them lay the Garden of Kharn, a sickly, yellowish tangle of vegetation blocking Raft's view. He could see the guarding wall marching to left and right, curving in to form what must be an enclosure. There were none of the giant trees within the wall, though their columns loomed above and beyond it.

Raft moved on, keeping to the river bank. The bushes were strange to him, though he was no botanist. They seemed a rather impossible hybrid of fungus and true plant. They were fern and mushroom in one.

Oddly he thought of them as vampires, draining life from the very ground.

That forest was not normal—no. The cyclopean trees outside were friendly by comparison. They, at least, were as immense and aloof as gods.

But these plants, these sickly hybrids, grew with a rank luxuriance that was in itself unhealthy. Movement crawled through the yellow jungle, not the wave-motion of wind,

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but secretive, stealthy movements which made Raft's scalp prickle.

Very faintly, scarcely noticeable, he felt a presence in the Garden. And he knew, then, why Janissa had not wanted to speak of Kharn.

For that intangibly sensed presence was not malignant. It was worse. It was cold and distant and alien.

And, intrinsically, it was very evil.

RAFT moved even more cautiously now. There was menace here, the more ominous because he could not define it. It was a brooding, enigmatic presence which was sensed by the cat-people as well as by himself. This added up to significance.

Felines and simians react in different ways to the same stimulus. Cats are notorious for their acceptance of the supernatural, which meant simply the supernormal, vibrations and radiations too subtle to be sensed fully by mankind. Psychic menaces that would give a man cold chills would rouse a cat to purring ecstasy.

Similarly, cats react violently to a canine menace—a wolf—whereas a man simply reaches for the nearest weapon.

This malignancy, therefore, was a presence alien to both feline and simian.

Perhaps, it was alien chiefly because of the altered evolutionary standard in this hothouse valley of forced growth. There was an odd sort of familiarity about that unseen presence. Raft felt certain that he had encountered something of the sort before, and often. Yet never had his living flesh shrunk from the mere nearness of any creature as it did now. Whatever dwelt in the Garden of Kharn, it was nothing remotely normal or healthy.

He stepped beneath the broad leaves and mushroom-caps of the forest. A sulphurous yellow light filtered through from above, lacking in the cool clarity of the atmosphere outside the Garden.

The ground underfoot was spongy, a moist, slippery muck into which his sandals sank mushily, with an unpleasant sucking sound. It was not silent here. There were furtive, quick movements all about him, hidden in that yellow jungle.

He was an intruder and felt it. A fleshy stem bent slowly toward him, sticky juice exuding from its surface. The sweetish odor of the liquor was sickening. Raft stepped away, and the branch rose slowly toward the perpendicular, as though it was dragging itself painfully upright against the fetters of gravity.

Yes, the forest was conscious of him. But there were no cannibal trees here, no gigantic Venus fly-traps that could swallow him whole. There was something horrible about the straining, awkward motion of those heavy leaves and stems.

The place was alive with insects. The forest crawled with them, flies, moths, butterflies, a myriad varieties crept and buzzed and fed on the ichor the trees sweated.

Some of the fungi had hollow caps like huge bowls, and the stench that rose from those liquid-filled basins was overpowering. Yet it was not entirely unpleasant.

Attar of roses is sickening in quantity, but the merest suggestion of attar has the opposite effect. Had the forest not sweated their perfume till the very air was saturated with it, Raft might not have objected. As it was, his clothes were moist and stinking with the stuff before he had traveled more than a few yards.

The trail of Parror and Craddock was well marked. There were other tracks in the soil, ambiguous prints Raft did not recognize. But he ignored these to follow his quarry. Parror had headed directly toward the center of the Garden.

One of the pink webwork creatures crept slowly into view. A filament of raw nerves, it crawled up the stem of a fungus and pulled itself into the liquid-filled cap. It immersed itself, floating motionless, its tendrils spreading out like the hair of a drowned woman.

A little creature, plated like an armadillo, rolled into view. Raft watched it warily. All over the armored body sharp spines stuck out.

It rolled toward Raft, but he avoided it easily. The spines looked dangerous. They might be toxic. Luckily the creature could not move fast.

It rolled into the jungle and was gone.

Raft went on. He saw another of the armored animals, but it was licking the stem of a fern-mushroom, and did not notice him. Then a clearing opened ahead, and it was—carpeted.

That was Raft's first impression. Patterns of flowers, arabesque and exotic, blazed with a riot of color within a circular expanse twenty feet in diameter. But they were not flowers. A queer, smooth glaze seemed to

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overlie that expanse—and it was a carpet, after all. The meaningless, twisting pattern was the first touch of vivid color he had seen in the sa[illegible]on forest.

Raft stood scowling, sensing more strongly now that dim pulse of a living presence in the Garden.

Slowly there crept into his mind the thought of a voice—whispering.

CHAPTER XI

Creeping Menace

IT CAME so slowly, so imperceptibly, that eerie voice, that Raft could not tell when it took form and shape in his brain. Yet it was not exactly a. voice nor a thought. Rather, it was something akin to each, but with a difference. Communication is aimed at what psychologists call empathy—the transference of the senses from one mind to another, so that perfect understanding may be approached. It is rapport, never complete, always groping—

Till now.

Because the Intruder understood Raft. With its ancient wisdom it knew the very structure of his soul. Like ivy sliding through crevices in a wall, the thing permeated Raft, as though he stood bathed in a light that flowed into his body. As though he were a living sponge through which tidewater stole.

The slow tide mounted.

The heavy scent of the forest was not so unpleasant now. Raft could sort out the component elements which made up the perfume, the sharp, pungent fluid that the armadillo-creatures liked, the warm, oily, sweet ichor that fed the nerve-things. Other juices, musk-heavy, eucalyptus-keen, salty and sour and pungent were present. It was oddly fascinating, this business of analyzing the odors and recognizing each one.

For they were, in essence, food-odors. Not human food. But nevertheless those smells stimulated the purely physical part of Raft and, through that, struck deep into his mind.

Feeding was an integral part of the life-cycle, the purpose for which all things were created. Dulled senses could not appreciate the pure ecstasy of absorbing nourishment. Only specialized beings could understand the delight which went through every cell of the body.

The nerve-things. They lay immersed in their warm, steaming liquor, tingling with electric pleasure as they absorbed the fluid that was food and drink to them. The armadillo-beasts. The feeling of taste on the taste-buds of a tongue. Cool liquid slipping down a dry throat, sharp and refreshing. The pleasure of taste, and taste alone.

You have always known hunger, Brian Raft.

He was standing in the center of that patterned carpet, he noticed. It did not matter. He was trying to concentrate on that message, that inviting whisper which spoke to him of delights so purely physical that they transcended anything else.

Not only animal-beings, but plants as well, knew hunger and satiation. For plants fed through their root-systems, set deep into the breathing earth that is the primal source of all life. Something utterly unimaginable crawled through Raft, the physical sensation of having roots, of feeling himself absorb nourishment through vegetable tissue. Plant-cells. He was part of the earth itself, and it fed him.

He sank to his knees on that smooth, vivid carpet.

Now he was looking up at a shimmering dance of faint light. He was on his back, arms flung wide, and a tingling, delightful warmth was saturating him. He was on quicksand which very slowly, very gently, settled beneath him.

Or it was not settling. It was he who was dissolving, being absorbed into that alien substance on which he lay. He was becoming part of the composite, hungry life that beat distantly all around him, murmuring in the slow motions of the trees, shuddering through the very earth.

You have always known hunger, Brian Raft. You are one. I am many.

Therefore feed and be content, the silent voice said. Sip the sharp, tingling essence that nourishes the armored beasts. Steep yourself in the warm smoothness of the liquor in the fungus-cups. Thrust roots into the soil, and know the subtle delight of a feeding which permeates all of you, body and mind.

Brighter grew the swirling mists. They blotted out vision. But there was no need for eyes. The trees were blind, yet they thrilled with ecstasy as their roots sucked up food.

The trees?

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No, they could not feel. And yet they could. Something bound them to all other life here, by an unbreakable cord.

The Garden of Kharn hungered and was fed.

MEMORIES flashed through Raft's mind. The Intruder was questioning, seeking, probing for what? He remembered the sharp catnip taste of beer, the peppery spiciness of curry, the fresh hot taste of newly-baked bread. The sweet juice of tangerines was in his mouth, and the heavy richness of cocoa. The aromatic tickling of old brandy.

Eagerness touched Raft. The probing grew more violent. He half roused himself from his trance.

Still the memories were dragged into the forefront of his consciousness. The tastes of things he had known once, elsewhere.

Where, then?

In a world where brandy was sipped from sleek glass inhalers, where bread was baked in ovens, where cocoa was served in cups, on tables upon which white linen was spread. Association clicked in Raft's brain. He remembered more than food now.

He remembered civilization. And with that thought came realization of himself, of Brian Raft. He was not a sensuous machine for sucking up nourishment.

The bright mists swept down like a shrouding blanket. The Garden of Kharn sent its heavy perfume like a tide over Raft. But he remembered, very suddenly and chillingly, another Garden, and a Tree which had borne strange fruit. A command that said, "Ye shall not eat of it."

You have always known hunger, Brian Raft. Feed as I feed. Know ecstasy as I know it.

A still, cool, distant voice, infinitely alluring, impossible to resist, although it, too, aroused memory. That indefinable familiarity was stronger now. The presence that infiltrated the Garden was one that Raft had known before, in different form.

Then he remembered.

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die.

The blind shock of realization stabbed through Raft with abysmal violence. His muscles jerked into tenseness. He attempted to spring up, and found that he could not.

That gelid carpet had flowed upon him, over him, as he had lain motionless.

Yet it was possible to move. With infinite effort he dragged his arm down till his hand closed over the hilt of the dagger. He could feel the treacherously pleasant embrace of the thing all around him. A winding sheet that would have absorbed him, he thought, as he lay helpless.

He stabbed up, claustrophobia bringing dry panic to his throat. He slashed in a blind frenzy of panic till the living carpet was riboned. The worst part was that the entity

[*Turn page*]

"Yes, Yes--I Can See! But--I Can See Two Things at Once--and Nothing Looks Solid Any More!"

BLINDED, Vera Brooks submitted to a strange operation performed by Dr. Douglas Ashfield. The operation succeeded in enabling her to see, but what she saw made her cover her face with her hands in bewilderment.

"I can see through the walls," she said breathlessly. "There is a crazy looking landscape out there—weirdly vast. And some ruins of some sort—like cities. It's—it's awful!"

An endless horizon stretched out before Vera Brooks—for amazingly, she had entered the Fourth Dimension! And she was to take two others along with her into the unknown in OTHER EYES WATCHING, by Polton Cross, next issue's astounding complete novel!

Follow an adventurous trio into the Fourth Dimension in one of the most interesting science fiction novels Polton Cross has ever written! Look forward to it!

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did not try to flee. It let itself be cut to rags, till all that flowery beauty was torn and spoiled. Raft stumbled away into the dubious shelter of the saffron forest, choking for a breath of clean air. He felt filthy and contaminated.

It revolted him that any one of his senses, the purely animal one of taste, could be so treacherous!

What monstrous dead-end evolution had developed such a devil's Garden as this?

It was more than symbiosis. It was an attunement of all life within these walls. Outside, on the cyclopean trees, various species killed each other, ate, propagated, and died. But in Kharn there had been a gradual absorption, a bond growing into existence between plant and animal life.

One species—dominant!

Raft presently saw that species.

Deeper in the forest, the shapeless mound of flesh lay under a transparent hemisphere that seemed to be unbreakable. Raft yielded to impulse and smashed a rock down upon it, without result. He did not wish to fire his revolver, for fear of forewarning Parror, but he had an idea that a bullet would not harm that protective barrier either. Immersed in a watery liquid the gray mass floated. Small conduits like arteries led down into the ground.

A brain?. Only partially. Sections of it were abnormally developed, others vestigial. There were other additions which Raft could not understand. But he felt more strongly than ever the intangible evil that throbbed out from the thing.

FOR it was reptilian. Here in Kharn the reptilian species had become dominant, subjugating all other life into a fantastic rapport that made the Garden itself a single entity. There was no really recognizable intelligence in the being. Reptilian instincts are not mammalian, and a tremendously evolved reptile might have nothing at all in common with other creatures.

The thing lived only for the specialized pleasure of taste. It had developed the necessity of feeding into a sensory ecstasy that was exclusive of all other faculties. Intelligence there might be, of a sort, but it was applied only to purposes that would aid the monster's dominant instinct.

Through the Garden, through living trees and living flesh, that horrible, ravening hunger-urge had swept. Trees and flesh ate as their—brain—commanded. In return, transmitted their sensory reactions to the reptilian thing that had gone beyond the touch of any sense but one.

Impregnable, alien, living only for blind delight, the horror floated within the transparent dome.

Shuddering, Raft turned away. Once more he turned to the easily-discernible trail of Parror and Craddock. The sooner he caught up with them, the sooner he could get out of the Garden. Unless they themselves had fallen victim to Kharn's menace.

They had not. The white gleam of pillars showed ahead. A figure was visible there, working at something, and Raft recognized Parror's sleek hair and the velvet beard that shadowed the jaw. The Flame's guardian sensed Raft's presence instantly. He whirled, eyes narrow, and then, relaxing, laughed.

The familiar anger began to rise in Raft. As always, he was conscious of Parror's calm arrogance, his complete self-assurance. He tried to fight down the feeling.

"So you got away from Darum," Parror said, smiling with some secret amusement. "You're shrewder than I'd thought. How did you know where to find me?"

Raft ignored the question. "Where's Craddock?" he asked.

Parror's head moved slightly. Beyond a pale column lay a motionless figure, eyes closed.

"There he is. Don't bother to take out your knife. He's unharmed." Parror finished winding up a thin coil. He dropped the silvery wire into a pocket and fumbled there for a moment. When his hand emerged, it wore one of the taloned gauntlets.

"You touched me once in anger," Parror said silkily. "I haven't forgotten that. I've no further use for you or Craddock." He was almost purring. "I've an extra glove. Here."

Raft said, "Thanks. I can take care of myself." He had an idea that might remove the careless smile from Parror's face. It would be a pleasure to do just that.

He took out the jeweled glove he had stolen from Darum's treasure-chamber and slipped it on his right hand. Parror nodded.

"You learn fast," he said, flexing his fingers so that the dull claws spread and closed menacingly. Raft poised himself and waited silently.

Dull claws.

They were bright metal where they joined

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the gloves, but their three-inch blades were stained dark. Raft suddenly guessed the significance of that. He had an idea that if those razor-sharp talons penetrated his skin, he would die, no matter how slight the wound.

Treachery, to a feline, was not dishonorable, it seemed.

Too late now to call a halt. Parror was stalking forward, his eyes shining. Moreover, Raft still had an ace in the hole. But he dared not fail.

Then Parror sprang. He was laughing, his velvet motion almost careless, as he came in with the agility of a jaguar. With rippling, nimble speed he charged, swerving at the last moment, while the talons raked straight at Raft's face.

Raft ducked under the slash. His hand came up, clenched into a fist. That short, deadly blow cracked solidly against Parror's chin. Raft felt flesh grind against his knuckles as hard gems ripped through skin and grated on bone.

WHATEVER Parror had expected, it was not this. He was flung back, dazed and reeling, and for a few seconds was actually unconscious as he wavered there. Then the blinding berserk rage dropped upon him like a scarlet cloak. His lips flattened. His eyes flamed green. His face was that of a devil—or a beast.

Raft had torn off his glove. He held da Fonseca's revolver now, and he was smiling coldly.

"Come on," he whispered. "Come on, Parror. It's just what I want. Close quarters. So I won't be able to miss."

Parror's gaze flashed to the weapon. Briefly mad fury and caution battled within him. He strained forward with tigerish blood-hunger in his contorted face.

He—hissed!

Raft started to walk toward his opponent. Parror snarled something that sounded like an oath. He made a furious, baffled gesture and whirled away. Raft's finger tightened on the trigger, and, on impulse, he sent a snap shot after Parror.

Either he missed completely, or the bullet was too slow in this accelerated world. For the cat-man was gone in the saffron jungle. The tangled underbrush swallowed him.

Raft shrugged and turned to the motionless Craddock. He worked on the man for a short time. Respiration was slow, and the skin was moist and clammy. Shock, probably. And with good cause, Raft thought, his mouth twisting into an ugly shape.

At last Craddock's eyes fluttered open. There was intelligence behind them, not the hypnotic stupor Raft had feared. He managed a crooked, weak smile.

"Brian. How—how's tricks?"

"Okay, for the moment," Raft said. "How do you feel?"

"Nearly normal," Craddock murmured, his voice growing stronger. "It's just reaction from hypnosis, I think. It'll pass."

"Don't try to get up. Just take it easy."

"Where's Parror?"

Raft explained. Craddock nodded slowly.

"He won't be back. He got what he wanted."

"You mean—what?"

"Information. He had a machine, a little gadget that probed my mind. It dug up memories I didn't even know I had. That was why he brought me here. He needed time to adjust the thing to my brain. I'm of a different species, so there were difficulties. But he solved them."

Raft frowned.

"Too bad he's such a devil. He's smart."

"He's no devil, except by human standards," Craddock said oddly. The maimed hands lifted. Craddock rubbed his eyes and shook his head as though to clear it. "A different psychology. To them, the end always justifies the means. Parror's end is to stimulate the Flame. Curupuri."

"And he can do it now?"

"When he gets the equipment he needs. That'll take time."

"Yeah," Raft said thoughtfully. "And Darum's got the unseen road guarded by his soldiers."

"Darum?"

"The king of Paititi. Listen, Dan. Do you feel strong enough to tell me what happened?"

"There isn't much," Craddock said. "I was in a trance, but I could see what was going on. Parror brought me here. He had a claw-tipped glove he'd poisoned, and he fought off some creatures with it, pretty nasty specimens."

"In here? In the Garden?"

"The yellow forest," Craddock said doubtfully. "Yes, it was here. When we got to this place, he rigged up a barrier of some sort, with wire. I don't know what it was. But it worked. It must have. We weren't bothered after that.

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"Parror put his gadget on my head and kept adjusting it, dragging out all the memories I'd ever had. Eventually he got the secret of the Flame. The part I'd read, from the old records of the First Race, but that I hadn't understood."

Craddock hesitated.

"Funny. The symbols were stored up in my brain, though I never knew what they meant. You never really forget anything, you know, Brian. It's all there, in your subconscious, layer after layer of submerged memories that go back to the time your brain first became capable of storing up thoughts and impressions.

"Eventually I remembered. But I had to write it out. It had been written, not spoken. The Indio language is a degraded version of it. Just the same Parror figured it out. And he's going to waken the Flame, when he gets the equipment ready."

"That's dangerous," Raft said.

"I suppose it is. Still—" Craddock looked at his deformed hands "—I risked it once. Blindly, of course. Parror knows what he's doing."

RAFT thought of that tremendous power unleashed and raging unchecked through Paititi.

"I wonder."

Craddock shivered a little. "I hope so, Brian! If the Flame ever gets out of control, the game is over."

"We'd better get out of here. This isn't a safe spot. Are you able to walk yet?"

"Sure, if you can help me a little." But Craddock was still weak, and he needed more than a little assistance as they retraced their steps through the saffron jungle. Raft supported him over the rougher spots, and he leaned heavily on the younger man's arm.

They kept a sharp eye out for Parror, though Raft felt certain that the Flame's guardian had left the Garden by now, intent upon gathering the equipment he would need for the ultimate experiment.

Nevertheless, there was still danger. Kharn —watched. Raft could sense the hidden, reptilian menace lurking in the yellow shadows under the trees.

They were almost at the river-gap when Raft touched Craddock's arm and they halted. There was something ahead, blocking their path. Not the nerve-bushes, but a sickly, saffron thing which lay like half-solid dough along the bank for twenty feet or more. Raft's brows contracted.

"It wasn't here before," he said slowly. "I don't like it."

Craddock straightened and drew a deep breath. "Guess I'll have to stand on my own feet for awhile. You may need both hands. See those pseudopods sliding this way? The thing's alive."

"An amoeba?"

"It isn't that. It's—there's no sharp line of demarcation between animal and vegetable here. It may be protoplasm but, I think, it's allied to those fern-mushrooms. If it caught us we'd probably get digested. However, it's slow."

"Yeah. But it's big. You feel up to running?"

Craddock drew himself together. "Okay. Where?"

"Let's move along the shallows here and then run like blazes for the tunnel."

Craddock nodded. They stepped into a cold, slow current and waded forward, feeling the water slide leisurely around their legs as they watched the jellied, saffron entity on the bank. They came abreast of it, and the tunnel-mouth lay only a little way ahead.

Raft began to think, as he splashed on, that they would make the tunnel without trouble after all. The monster of Kharn, he told himself, was not a creature of action. It's danger lay in the mind. It used purely mental power to attract and overpower its prey. Nor was it accustomed to highly developed minds, able to resist. Perhaps it had never needed to develop physical offense.

The water suddenly boiled just before them, sliding with nightmare slowness from a round saffron arm. A pseudopod, stretching after them from the bank, broke the surface. Another lifted out of the water close behind it.

They tried to circle farther out to avoid them, but the footing shelved off steeply into dangerous depths. The pseudopod reached inexorably out — farther — farther —, and touched Raft.

It was filled with a living, hothouse warmth that made his flesh crawl. It wound about his waist, its moist heat striking inward against his skin as if digestion were already at work upon him.

He felt its strong pull toward the bank. He tried to get out his knife, but another coil came up from somewhere and laid a warm, wet embrace about his arms, fastening them to his sides. He felt himself being

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pulled shoreward, and struggled hard to keep his footing in the slow water.

"Hold firm, Brian!"

Craddock stumbled forward, lips set, fighting his own weakness.

He got the knife from Raft's belt with a violent surge of effort, and slashed at the tentacle. That yellowish, half-fungoid flesh gave like cheese. It had surface tension, apparently, but it was not more than half solid. Craddock slashed, and the pseudopods fell away and were washed slowly, slowly off down the current. The incident was like a nightmare in its gentle, deliberate, inexorable sluggishness.

The whole mass of the thing was sliding into the stream now.

"Come on," Raft said. "Can you make it?"

He seized Craddock's arm as they ran for the archway, the water sucking like glue around their feet.

On their right the entire bank seemed to be giving way and dropping toward them in hungry, malignant pile, that could afford to take its time.

Craddock's weakness hampered them. The water parted reluctantly under their splashing feet. It was like running through semi-liquid rubber, with the great, slow, yellow thing rolling its bulk forward to intercept their way.

The mouth of the tunnel opened before them, and the nerve-networks that acted as sentries made a quick, concerted, abortive motion to stop them, as if the whole valley answered a single brain, as perhaps it did. But Craddock slashed weakly at them with the knife, and when the blade had severed two or three the rest shrank and folded down out of harm's way as the two men plunged through.

"They've—stopped," Craddock panted, glancing back. "They won't—follow outside, I guess."

"Keep going," Raft urged him grimly. "No use taking chances now."

They stumbled on, out of the gloom at last into the cool green light from the leafy vault, far overhead, that roofed Paititi. It was like finding sanctuary.

But not quite. A quarter of a mile away, rounding one of the giant trees, a little column was moving steadily toward them. Raft groaned.

"Darum's soldiers. That looks like—yeah, it's Vann, all right. Come on, Craddock. Maybe we can make it."

"I—I can't." The older man staggered as he tried to keep up with Raft's quick strides. "Go on ahead. Don't mind about me."

Raft halted and shrugged. "They'd have caught us anyway. We'll wait, I guess. And fight it out." He touched the butt of the revolver, and watched that glittering column draw nearer.

Finally, the column deployed, showing two score of soldiers, wary, armed men who spread out to surround their prisoners. Vann's scarred, hard face was impassive.

"You're captives," he said. "There'll be time for a duel later, if you want, but the king needs you both now. So you are Brian Raft, after all, eh? And this man is Craddock?" He stared curiously.

"What does Darum intend to do?" Raft asked. "Cut my throat?"

"No," Vann said. "Not yet, at least. Where is Parror?"

"Gone. I don't know where."

"We'll find him." Vann issued swift orders. Half of the group broke up, spreading out into the forest.

"Now we'll go back to Doirada Castle. Meanwhile, you can tell me, Raft, what lies in the Garden of Kharn. I'd have entered it to carry out my orders, but not with any pleasure. What devils lair in Kharn?"

"I'll tell you later," Raft said wearily. He let the revolver drop back into his pocket. "Right now, I'm too tired to care. Let's go back to Doirada."

CHAPTER XII

Power of Science

QUIETLY they stood before the king, waiting, in the dim-lit room where Yrann's harp had sung. But it was brighter now. The veiled woman was not around. In her place Janissa sat on a cushioned couch near the dais. She had looked at Raft once, given him a cryptic smile, and turned back to watch Darum, who squatted cross-legged amid his silks.

Darum watched Raft out of hooded eyes.

"You think I am going to kill you," he said. "Why? Don't trouble to answer. I can read that much in your face. Because you tried to kill me, with that knife Vann took from you. Also because you stole my amulet."

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Raft attempted to speak, but the king lifted his hand.

"Wait. Your race is not as mine. I see no great evil in your attempt at murder. You'd have succeeded had you deserved to succeed. Since you didn't—" He nodded "—It is over and done with. What is past is past. Tomorrow you may try again, or I may, and succeed. And I will take back the amulet too. Meanwhile, Janissa has told me a great deal."

"When I found you'd escaped, Brian—I told Darum," the girl said. "I knew you'd gone after Parror."

"Yes," the king said silkily. "And I wanted Parror. He goes too far, I think. After all, I rule in Paititi, not Parror."

"For a while," Raft said quietly. "If he starts the Flame, and it gets out of control, you won't rule anything."

"So he learned Craddock's secret." Darum sighed. "He is outlawed now. Every man's hand is against him. And I have guarded the unseen road so he cannot enter it. I do not think he will reach the Flame."

"Parror is clever," Janissa said.

Craddock broke in.

"He'll need instruments. I know that much. It'll take time."

Darum shrugged.

"I am no scientist. I know only that there is danger both ways. If the Flame fades below a danger level—well, Janissa? What then?"

"We will become as the cavern-beasts," she told him. "We will degenerate as the First Race did."

"But when that day will come none can say. In our lifetime, or our children's, or perhaps not even then. And if Parror tries to rouse the Flame, and fails to check it, that will mean immediate destruction."

"He doesn't think so," Craddock said. "He's sure he can control the Flame."

"But can he?" Darum leaned forward. "That is what I seek to know. Can he—surely?"

"I wish I knew," Craddock said. "Parror got certain memories out of my mind, but they were mere superficial memories, not knowledge. I don't even know what most of the symbols I wrote down for him meant. I didn't know thirty years ago, when I translated part of the record."

"The record that was destroyed when the Flame wakened," Darum said. "A secret only Parror and you know now?"

"I don't know," Craddock said. "It was dragged out of my mind by hypnosis. I wasn't conscious most of the time. I've only the vaguest idea what Parror intends to do."

"Well, the first step is to capture Parror, so he won't rouse the Flame," Darum said practically. "I hope my guards will find him soon. Meanwhile, how am I to deal with you two?"

"Why not just let us go?" Raft said slowly. "Simians are too curious. Your race would try to enter Paititi. Two species, both dominant, cannot live together successfully."

"Why not?" Raft asked. "There's the possibility of mutual benefit."

"Our minds are too unlike."

"I think you underestimate Parror, Darum," Janissa said. "He's clever, and he has more knowledge than I. There are—powers connected with the Flame that not even I understand. But Parror understands them. Also, I have heard legends of a secret way to reach the cave where Curupuri burns."

"He must not reach the Flame!" Darum said.

Raft glanced at Janissa, and drew courage from her steady gaze. "Suppose he does, though. In spite of everything. That means that he'll waken the Flame. If he makes a mistake, nothing can save Paititi. Right?"

The king nodded.

"True."

"All right," Raft said. "Here's an answer. Forestall him."

DARUM jerked his head up to stare. "Waken the Flame ourselves?"

"Why not?" Raft asked. "We've got the science of two cultures here in this room, which gives us an edge on Parror. Janissa knows the Flame. She's its hereditary guardian. I know biochemistry, and Craddock isn't a layman. And you must have technicians here."

"We do."

"Well, then, what's to prevent us from making the device ourselves?"

"The question of possible failure," Darum said. "The First Race never tested their machine. They waited too long. There is absolutely no way of foretelling whether it would actually control the Flame. Trial and error is the only way, and one error means destruction."

"There is a way," Raft said.

Janissa breathed a question.

Raft took out the amulet. Seeing it, the

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king's eyes narrowed.

"You know what this is, Darum. It holds a spark of Flame. It is the Flame, but too tiny to be very dangerous. Why not use this as the control? If this spark from the Flame itself can be stimulated, and leashed, you'd know the machine was successful."

Darum shrugged.

"Parror may have the same idea." Raft continued. "I hope so. But in case he doesn't, we'll have the jump on him, and know definitely whether the device the First Ones planned is safe."

Darum hesitated.

"Perhaps that is true."

Raft talked fast. "If this works, it'll remove the menace of the Flame forever. It'll mean complete control of that source of energy. The threat of degeneration will be removed from Paititi completely. Suppose we do fail —we'll simply be right back here where we stand now, won't we?"

"He's right," Janissa said breathlessly. "It's a chance, Darum. The only one, if Parror outwits us. And it may mean safety for Paititi forever."

Darum did not speak for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly.

"I agree, then. Janissa, this is in your hands. And now leave me. We will talk later."

The girl led them out. Behind them the lights dimmed, and, as Raft moved along the passage that led from the king's chamber, he heard a murmuring of faint music.

Yrann. Should he have warned the king against her? Perhaps. But he doubted whether Darum would have believed him. He shelved the thought for future reference.

Meanwhile Craddock was pulling at his arm.

"Brian."

"Well?"

"I didn't want to queer the pitch, but—" His voice lowered "—you forgot one thing. I can't remember what Parror dragged out of my mind. He forced it out with his gadget, but I was in a trance. I don't remember now."

Janissa had overheard even Craddock's soft whisper.

"It is well you didn't mention that to Darum," she said. "But I think the problem can be solved. I don't know what device Parror used. Nevertheless, when a gate has been opened once, it opens more easily the next time. I have some knowledge of the mind, Craddock, and possibly we can succeed."

"We'll get it out of you," Raft said. "If it means a course in psychonamics!" . . .

It did, almost. Raft had used medical hypnosis himself, and could help Janissa, who otherwise might have been hindered by the alienage of minds, the more than racial difference between Craddock's thought-patterns and her own. But with Raft as mentor, the secret wisdom was slowly, painfully pulled into the light.

They did not sleep. Some drug like benzedrine, Raft guessed, kept them alert and stimulated for their long sessions. There was technical equipment in the castle, and there were scientists as well, though their knowledge lay chiefly in the realm of the psychic. Many allied sciences were represented among the cat-people. Surgery was highly developed, as was biology.

IT WAS Craddock's subconscious they were probing, and it was like fishing in a teeming pool. Too often they caught the wrong fish, till they learned the right sort of bait to use. But finally symbols began to take form on the pad that was always ready to Craddock's hand. He scribbled a line—hesitated, corrected himself—and, step by step, pieced out the record he had read only once, thirty years before, but which his subconscious mind had never forgotten.

"If Parror hadn't opened the way, we'd never be able to do this," Janissa said later as she was standing on a balcony with Raft, taking a well-earned breathing-space after a particularly arduous session. Before them the slow cloud of mist hung like an enormous tower.

Raft looked at her. He remembered his half-mocking question of long ago, whether two species could mingle. But logic did not seem so important now. The warm, living presence of Janissa was more vital.

Till lately he had not known her, really. She had been a paradoxical, fascinating girl who had revealed few of the traits that make humanity human. But now, since they had been working together, he had come to understand her more, and to know that he would never be able to understand her fully.

That sweetly curved, softly malicious little face, with its hint of diablerie, its lovely, feline strangeness, was more attractive than he dared admit to himself. The aquamarine, shadowed eyes were turned up to his . . .

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Eyes of Bast, whose velvet aloofness guards the night of Egypt. Yet she could be playful too, gay as a kitten might be, and with the same endearing charm.

Now as he stood there, something hidden and secret flashed between them. There was no need for a physical embrace. It was subtler than that. But, briefly, it seemed as though a veil had been lifted, a veil that hung between two beings who had been alien.

His hand stole out and touched hers. They looked out across Doirada Gulf, to the colossal columns of giant trees that supported the sky of Paititi.

He thought, Only here in this lost land beyond space and time, could I have found Janissa.

They were silent. Speech was not necessary. Hand in hand they stood, lost in the warm, comforting awareness of each other's presence, until Craddock's voice called them back to the work of harnessing the Flame.

What could harness such a tremendous force, a power which burned in the heart of the spiral nebulae and kindled giant suns? The chain that bound Fenris-wolf? What was the Flame?

They did not know. But men do not know what electricity is, either. Yet they can tame it with insulated wires. What was needed here was insulation, but not only that. There must also be a means of stimulating the Flame. A safe way.

That was not easy to find. First the last fragments of the lost record had to be taken from Craddock's mind. Time after time hypnosis probed into his memories, and gradually the cryptic symbols made longer lines on the recording pad. Janissa could read those symbols for her own language was founded upon it, as her own civilization was built on the earlier culture of the vanished First Race. Also technicians were helpful.

For there were semantic difficulties. Raft knew the Indio dialect thoroughly, but he did not know the intricacies of Janissa's more highly developed language. There were symbols she could not explain to him. Then a chemist, perhaps, would sketch charts, electro-chemical hookups, or atomic patterns, until the answer clicked in Raft's mind.

He was no technician, though, and could not have built the device alone. Nor could Janissa. But his different background of human science was invaluable in casting light from another angle on the problem. There was the matter of the amulet, for example.

"When you turn the stone, it slows down metabolism," Raft pointed out. "That means the radiation is blocked at a variable rate. What blocks it? Something opaque to the vibration, eh?"

"The metal?" a physicist hazarded. "It's an alloy of chromite. Vanadium, perhaps. We'll have it tested."

For, though the last secrets of the records in Craddock's memory had been discovered by now, there were still gaps. In the days of the First Race, different elements had existed in the valley, elements which were now exhausted.

THEY found that the truth lay not only in the material of the amulet's setting, but in the intricate interlocking of alloys, a very tiny machine powered by the induced radiation of the energy-source itself, the spark in the crystal. That crystal was simply quartz, but how the radiant atom had been put into it Raft couldn't guess.

The secret, then, lay in a complicated arrangement of various alloys that seemed to block the energy-output of the spark. Part of this knowledge they gleaned from Craddock's hypnotically-stimulated memories; the rest they found by simple analysis. There was, finally, a dead end.

For they knew what elements they needed, and some of them no longer existed in Paititi.

Then the practical value of an alien culture was demonstrated. Raft thought of the possibility first. He had brought considerable equipment to Paititi in his rucksack, medical supplies, concentrated food in little tins, and there were his personal belongings, as well as Craddock's.

His watch yielded platinum, which was vital. There was tin to be found in the rucksack, and the firearms were taken apart to provide a treasure of necessary metals.

The laboratories of the technicians swiftly analyzed the loot, broke it down, and formed new alloys. Given the raw material, they could, at last, work out the equation.

The machine, when finished, was not large. Specifications had clearly indicated its proportions. It stood on a tripod, coming approximately to Raft's chest, a surprisingly simple device of crystal, metal, and hollow tubes.

The integral part of it was the fuse, which floated free in a mercury bath atop the gad-

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get. This was the safety, the innocuous-seeming footlong tube that had the power to control the tremendous radiations the rest of the machine was built to stimulate.

"Parror's bound to fail," Raft said. "Those special alloys—they don't exist in Paititi. He can't possibly make the safety control, and without it he'd know the experiment would be too dangerous."

Janissa was less certain.

"Parror has a blind confidence in himself. He might try to substitute other materials. The sooner we test this, Brian, the better I'll feel."

But the test was not spectacular. The thing was handled by remote control, to minimize the danger. Even with the tiny spark of energy in the amulet, there was peril.

Raft used a scanning glass to examine the amulet, five hundred feet away on the mossy plain. He looked briefly around the crowd that surrounded him—Craddock, Janissa, the technician and, with a silent prayer, turned on the power. Nothing happened. Machine and amulet remained as they had been.

"Doesn't it power the spark?" Janissa breathed.

"It ought to stimulate it," Raft said, and moved the needle on his rheostat device. He moved it too far. From the amulet a spear of light shot straight up, and simultaneously the moss for a hundred feet around sprang into—life! It writhed and crawled visibly, the ordinary progress of growth, accelerated incredibly by the radiation of the stimulated spark.

Hastily Raft adjusted the rheostat. But he was smiling. He knew, without the need for further experiment, that the machine was a success. Remained now only to discover whether its power could control the Flame itself. Raft thought it could, since it would, via induction, have all the Flame's power.

But the danger struck too soon.

CHAPTER XIII

Flying Demons

BRIAN RAFT wakened to see Janissa's face above him. The light she carried glowed through the darkened room.

"Brian!"

He blinked at her.

"Janissa—what's wrong?"

"It's Parror," she said. "I've touched his mind. He's on his way to the Flame."

That brought Raft bolt upright. "Good grief! You're sure?"

She nodded, her eyes shadowed with fear.

"His barrier slipped for an instant. I had been watching my mirror and, suddenly, I felt his thought. He goes by a secret way to waken the Flame."

"Where is he now?"

"In the forest somewhere. I could not tell. I could see only what he intended, and the secret way he will take. Brian, we must stop him somehow."

"We will," Raft said. "Wake up Craddock. Then we'll rouse the king."

Janissa slipped away, and Raft hastily donned his garments. His mind was working at top speed. He could not have guarded against this contingency, yet he felt at fault. Parror must have a duplicate machine, but it could not possibly be successful, without the special alloys that did not exist in Paititi. If Parror aroused the Flame, disaster would result.

The three of them went to Darum's suite. Vann was guarding the entrance, since it was the hour for sleep. He stared at them curiously, his scarred soldier's face hard. But when he heard the nature of their errand, he let them pass.

"Nevertheless, I'd better go with you," he said, falling in at their heels. "Assassinations have been cleverly managed before this."

Lights softly illuminated Darum's chamber. The king himself was there, relaxed on the cushions of his dais. He sprang awake instantly as they approached. His hand dropped toward the silks and came up with a long-bladed dagger. But he said nothing.

"There's no need for weapons," Raft growled. "Parror's got his own and he's ready to use it."

"Parror?" Darum let the knife fall. "You mean—the Flame?"

"Tell him, Janissa."

She explained swiftly. The king frowned in indecision.

"You say his machine will not work?"

"Oh, it'll work all right, but it will wreck things without the safety device," Raft pointed out. "Our only chance now is to get there before him, if we can. And if we can't, we'll take our own instrument. We may be able to check the Flame before it's too late."

"I was dreaming a strange dream," Darum said slowly. "I lay dead, I thought, here in

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my own chamber, and a shadow hung over Paititi. A shadow of light. Of life. But it could not bring life back to me, and it had power only to destroy. I wonder, now, if the vision will come true."

His voice was remote and strange, as if the memory of the dream had carried him back into the dream itself.

"It was a true dream, so far as the shadow goes," Janissa said. "There will be death for all of us, unless Parror is stopped."

"Death!" the king murmured as if he had heard only that one word out of all she said.

"Death."

Raft thought he recognized something in the timber of the soft, deep voice. He had heard Darum speak that way before. If the madness was coming back upon the king, at this moment of all moments when action and clear thinking was needed, ghastly things might happen.

"Parror will reach the Flame before you," Darum said in a soft monotone. "That much I—see." He dropped his head suddenly and hid his face in his hands. "I see no further yet." His voice came muffled. "Death—death in my dream. This room is full of death!"

The voice was wild now, but his face was still hidden. Madness wailed in the deep resonance of Darum's words, and yet there was conviction too, as if even in his madness he knew he spoke the truth.

"There is death here," he shrieked. "Too much death for one man. I shall not die alone. I think you must fail with the Flame, Janissa, Craddock, Raft! I think you must fail and doom us all, for this room reeks with death."

RAFT felt a thrill of horror. Utter conviction rang true in the king's voice. Conviction and madness.

"Death over all Paititi!" said Darum, lifting his face suddenly and showing them a wild and shining glare that saw nothing before it.

And suddenly "Death!" wailed a shiver of resounding strings from the curtains behind him. If ever music spoke a word, that music spoke and threatened. The promise was as clear as the sudden flash of a bared blade. It needed no articulation to speak its single syllable of prophecy.

The curtain swept aside, and Yrann's veiled figure stood there, fingers poised above the still-quivering strings. Faceless and veiled, like the Norn Atropos, ready to cut the thread that held Darum's life.

For a moment nobody moved. The room was too full of that certainty of doom which Darum's mad voice had made them all believe whether they would or no. For that instant, against all hope and reason, even Craddock, even Raft, knew certainly that there was no chance for life. In the single moment, they were all as mad as the king.

But only Raft understood what happened next. Only he knew what must have passed through Yrann's clouded mind. Death hung over Doirada Castle and the whole world she knew. The king had spoken, and in this moment there was no doubting the king. And she had waited so long for vengeance. The Flame would rob her of it now, unless—unless—she acted.

One last wild shrilling cry came shivering from the harp-strings. With the same motion that swept music across the instrument she flung the harp aside, letting it crash to the floor with a last jangling discord of its own.

She moved forward with a swift, stooping rush toward the couch. Her white hand, darting from the veils, was like a flung weapon in itself as she snatched up the long dagger he had dropped. Headlong, she hurled herself against him, swinging the blade like a scythe.

He was off guard. He tried to rise, to leap away from the blade's glittering descent, but the tangling silks caught and betrayed him. He managed only to writhe aside, so that the first blow only raked his ribs in a glancing wound. Yrann, still silent, brought up the knife again with deadly singleness of purpose.

Then Raft had her.

He felt her arch against his restraining arm with the desperate strength he remembered from their other struggle in this room, and a shock of unreasonable horror went through him as that veiled face turned to his.

She flung herself against his grip with a cat's sudden, explosive fury, and with one last frantic surge broke free. Springing back, still gripping the dagger, she turned her faceless gaze toward the king.

He was on his feet now, facing her, ready. Her chance was gone. She knew it. They could see the knowledge slacken the tautness of the lovely body beneath her veils. They heard her sigh once, deeply, in the tense silence of the room.

Then she moved suddenly, her draperies swirling like slow smoke, and sank the knife hilt-deep in her own heart!

Motionless, speechless, they watched her

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sink to the floor. Red came slowly out through the gray veils pinned by the knife against her.

Darum brushed past Raft. He knelt beside Yrann. His hand went out, poising over the veiled face. But he did not touch the gauzy webs that hid her.

"Yrann?" he said. "Yrann?"

But she did not stir. The red stain widened upon the gray.

Darum's fingers closed upon the hilt that stood up from her chest. He knelt there for a heartbeat, his hand caressing the weapon as if it were Yrann herself. Then his grip tightened.

He tore the knife free, dripping scarlet drops, and rose in a lithe, inhuman motion, facing Raft. His lips had flattened back, and the light in his eyes was the dark blaze of pure madness. He lifted the blade, and the red drops spattered in an arc across the carpet.

Raft stood motionless, his mind racing. He was too close to the king, and he was unarmed. There was no way of escaping that blow, unless he came to grips with the man, and he had no illusions about which of the two was stronger. Power flowed tremendously through the feline's rippling body, and madness lent it double strength.

"You saved my life," he said in a hissing snarl. "You came between us! You turned the knife against her as surely as if you held the blade. What use do you think life is to me now?" His features convulsed in the mad inhumanity of feline rage. "You—ape!"

Darum sprang.

FROM behind Raft a thin, shining flash of light darted, to quench itself in the king's throat. Darum's body arched. He strained to take one step more forward—to keep the dagger raised for its blow—

Then with shocking suddenness, all the strength went out of him and he dropped the silks with the lithe, silken limpness of the silks themselves. His fingers released the dagger, and he pulled the rapier from his throat, blood gushing from wound and mouth as it came free.

"Vann," he said, and coughed. "Vann. We have dueled before—but never thus!"

Vann's deep voice answered heavily.

"I served you, Darum, but I serve Paititi first. Yrann was not worth any man's love."

"She was so beautiful," the king whispered. "She could not bear to die—with Paititi—without slaying me. She hated me always. And—and—" He tried to choke back blood.

He lifted himself on suddenly strong arms and dragged himself forward a few feet. He ran gentle fingers down the dead woman's arm. Her harp lay where it had fallen, almost beneath her fingers. He touched the strings, and their sad music hung forlornly in the quiet air.

"I would have crushed Paititi," Darum said. "I would have—crushed the world—for her. Rather than have her harmed. She was so beautiful."

The king's head fell upon the soft body of Yrann. The tiger eyes closed. One hand sought for and found Yrann's.

His blood mingled with hers.

The red stream flowed slower and slower—

And flowed no more.

Vann stood motionless, his heavy shoulders sagging.

"Go now, while there's time," he said. "I did this to save Paititi, and now I find myself wondering whether I have struck steel into the wrong throat."

"Vann," Janissa said.

"Take them away, Janissa. Take these men from another world out of the king's presence. Let them stop Parror if they can."

"Parror?" Craddock whispered. He touched Raft's arm. "We'll have to move fast."

"Yes," Raft said tonelessly.

He turned and led the way out of the chamber. His face was gray, and sweat stood out in fine droplets on his cheeks.

Once outside, he did not mention the king.

"We'll need the machine," he said. "It's a portable, so we can manage the weight. But I'll want some straps."

They found silken scarves that would do as well, and the machine was adjusted on Raft's back. The light alloys made its weight less than its bulk would have indicated. That would help, since fast travel would be necessary if they hoped to forestall Parror.

Silently they left the castle, darkened now for the sleep-period. Outside the cool, clear daylight of Paititi was dazzling.

"We should have remembered weapons," Craddock said.

"It's too late now," Raft told him. "Janissa, you'll guide. Do you know the secret way to the Flame?"

"I think I can find it, yes. The thought in Parror's mind was clear enough. But it is a long way."

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Yet it was shorter than they expected. They did not head for Parror's castle. They angled off toward the base of the rock barrier that guarded Paititi. Four hours of fast travel brought them to it. There, however, time was lost as Janissa searched for the secret entrance.

"There are ruins here," she said. "Ruins of the Old Race. There should be a double column. Parror was thinking of it when I read his mind."

Silently Raft pointed. With a little cry Janissa ran to the spot he indicated. She felt the smooth surface of the rock-face, searching for a key.

Silently, smoothly, an oval opened in the bare stone.

Raft turned to stare back the way they had come.

"No sign of Parror," he said. "He may be ahead of us. Or he may not. We'll soon know." He followed Janissa and Craddock into the opening. Behind him the hidden door closed.

BUT they were not in darkness. A pale, cool glow came from the walls and roof and the smooth floor on which they stood. The tunnel wound upward at a steep slant, and the silence made Raft feel the blood beating in his ears.

"Come on," he said, shouldering the machine.

It was not long, that passage in the cliff. It made a short-cut through the rock to the cavern of the Flame. But, before then, there was another cavern.

An oval door barred their path. Janissa opened it easily, but she did not pass through the portal. Raft saw her slender figure poise, hesitate, and shrink back. He brushed past Craddock.

"What is it?" he asked.

Janissa did not answer.

"The First Race," Craddock said, in a breathless voice. "The First Race!"

It was the cavern Raft had seen when he had first entered Paititi. Leprous violet light bathed the dripping stalactites and crept over the thrusting stalagmites that made an upthrust forest. High overhead, slanting down at a dizzy angle, was the gravity-defying, nearly transparent tube of the unseen road, made visible now only because of the hordes of creatures that crawled upon it, as though striving to break through the glassy barrier.

The monsters!

Raft had seen them before, but only dimly. Now he felt his throat go dry and close with loathing.

Bat-winged and beast-snouted, degenerate and horrible, the things swarmed in the violet light there in the great cave. They were the descendants of what had once been the First Race, the mighty civilization that had reared the proud castles of Paititi.

And fallen now—fallen into the primal pit of horror.

The baleful radiations that had once raged through Paititi when the Flame waned long ago had changed them to demons. Few were alike. Some had immense bat-wings, while others flopped and dragged their fat, shining bulks among the stalagmites. And some were dwarfed. Some were giants. Some had the clawed feet of giant birds.

Straight as a lance across that arena of terror ran the path they had been following, a faint white glow that ended at the farther wall, before an oval panel that was obviously a door.

"Through—there?" Craddock said.

Raft looked at Janissa. She was white-faced, but she caught her breath and stepped out of the tunnel's protection, into the violet light of the cavern.

"We'll run for it," Raft said. "If we can reach that other door, we'll be all right."

They ran, panic spurring their heels. The sight of the nightmare horde flapping and crawling and leaping all about them was horrible. And the thought of those black talons actually touching them—it was not a good thought.

A stir went through the monsters, a ripple of interest. As Raft ran, he saw from the corners of his eyes, that shapes were converging upon them. But the three were more than halfway across the cavern now, and there was more than an even chance that they could reach their goal before the monsters rallied to investigate.

Raft reckoned without the winged beings. Something struck him heavily from behind, sending him to his knees. He struggled to regain his feet. Janissa, glancing back, saw what had happened, and with a little cry, ran back to help him.

A nightmare shape, scaled and horned like a medieval demon, sprang at her—caught her in its grip.

Cursing, Raft plunged forward, heedless of the creature on his back. His fist smashed out into the face of the monster. It was

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driven back, screaming in a thin, high-pitched wail of agony.

That was the signal. From all around the devils of Paititi swooped and lumbered and dragged themselves toward the intruders. Raft went down under the weight of foul-smelling bodies. He was blind with nausea and hatred and revulsion. His fists hammered at pulpy flesh, and the shrieking grew to a shrill crescendo.

That sickening odor almost choked him. The touch of the monsters against his skin was loathsome. They felt like fungoid things, like dead creatures raised to a ghastly similitude of life. And the faces were ghoulish demons.

CRADDOCK came back to use as a spear a fallen stalactite he had picked up. Raft was relieved of his burden for a moment. He staggered up, looking for Janissa.

He saw her, in the midst of a group of monsters.

He had enough reasoning power left to find another fallen spike of stone before going to her rescue. The creatures, interbred and degenerate, were physically weak, but they had the advantage of numbers, and Raft realized that the sheer weight of those deformed bodies could press him down and smother him. His lips lifted in a snarl, he charged forward, stabbing with his improvised spear.

He felt flesh tear. He heard the squealing redouble in volume. The monsters came at him like a wave. They had the feeble malevolence of rats. As he went down on his back he tried desperately to turn, to shield the precious burden he carried—and failed.

He heard the machine's crash as it was crushed against the rock beneath him.

There was only hopelessness then, and blind hatred, and a feeling that he was drowning in floods of evil, living flesh. But he fought on. The remnants of the machine were ripped from his back. He lashed about him savagely with the sharp stalactite, till at last he had cleared a little space free of the monsters.

As he stood there, panting and half-naked, he saw that they had fought their way almost to the door. But at his feet coils and broken crystal and twisted metal told of the wreck of the machine that could save Paititi.

One thing remained whole—a foot-long cylinder of burnished alloy. It was the safety fuse that controlled the device's stimulating power. Raft snatched it up and thrust the tube into his belt.

"Brian," Craddock called. "Here!"

Raft lifted his spear and rushed. The monsters had learned the menace of that sharp spike of stone by now, and there was a little flurry as they gave back. Janissa was with Craddock, the two of them back to back, though the girl was unarmed. But she was bristling with fury, her hands clawed, like a kitten roused to anger.

"The door," Raft said. "Open it, Janissa."

He cut a red path for her. The worst danger was the flying monsters. More than once Raft swung up his weapon in time to rip the flesh of a swooping demon that came rushing down at him from the violet depths above. He fought on, grimly silent, conscious only of those devil-masks, distorted and horrible, glaring at him, spouting crimson as he struck, screaming in thin, wailing agony.

"Brian!" Janissa shrilled. "The door!"

He saw with surprise that it lay open. Craddock, white hair flying, broke through with a stumbling rush. Together the two charged that waiting portal.

They reeled through it. Raft whirled, thrust out at a pressing horde of monsters, as Janissa's hand swept out.

The oval door closed—barring the cavern.

The high screaming gave place to silence.

"They smashed the machine," Raft said hopelessly.

CHAPTER XIV

Raft Chooses

CRADDOCK was panting with excitement. His eyes were tired looking and weary.

"You saved the safety fuse," he said. "Maybe that's enough. If Parror's machine is a duplicate of the one we built, maybe we have a chance, even yet."

"It has to be, unless the man's a complete fool," Raft said. "But if we can stop him before he wakens the Flame, that'd be even better." He caught himself and laughed. "Parror's probably behind us, not ahead of us. If he passed through that cavern, they'd have broken his gadget too."

"Unless he knew another route," Janissa put in somberly. She tried to adjust her tat-

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tered garments, with fastidious, feline delicacy. Raft thought, watching her, even now she's half cat.

Then something quivered through the air about them, a burning, shaking vibration that raced through their bodies, quickening the living flesh and was gone. A low thunder faded into silence.

White-faced, Janissa turned to Raft. Her hands went out helplessly.

"The Flame!" she said. "It—wakes!"

With a curse, Raft sprinted forward, the others at his heels. To fail now, so close to success, would be intolerable. The tunnel was miles long, it seemed.

It ended at last, though not before that warning vibration had rushed in deep thunder through them twice more. Each time the effect was stronger. Each time the force grew more vital, more alive.

Janissa fumbled at the door, searching for the key. At last, the panel slipped away and was gone.

They stepped out on a small balcony of rock, from which a curving ramp twisted down to—to what?

It was dark, too dark to make out details clearly. Emptiness, it seemed, stretched far out above and below them.

Yet there was light. It was too faint to be more than a hint, or else it was too far away below him. Raft leaned on that dizzy railing and stared down, down, down almost to the bottom of the world, an immeasurable gulf in which one flicker of brilliance gleamed.

But it was not vertigo that struck Raft then. It was fear.

Fear plain and simple, and reasonless. He knew that feeling.

Once, in Madagascar, he had had to go through a guard-hut where sentries were sleeping. A noise, a false move, would have meant spears through his body. He had known then that they were going to waken. He had felt it, with every bit of his mind and every inch of his skin.

Like that. Something down below, where the light was, so vitally alive that he felt himself standing on its palm.

And something more as well. It was the jungle. Or the life that makes up the jungle. Steaming, fertile Amazon forests, roaring rivers, all that teeming, tremendous life that stirs in the green moist heat of the tropics. Blind and terrible and hungry—there in the abyss burned the energy that rages in the heart of the great nebulae, the destroyer and the awakener—Curupuri!

"The Flame sleeps," Janissa breathed.

But in the depths was a distant brightening. A low sound, below the threshold of hearing almost, deepened and grew louder. It became an intolerable thunder, crashing out like the roaring birth-pains of a god.

From that gulf that dropped toward the heart of the world—far down—very far below—rose the Flame.

It expanded and lifted, a spear, a tower, a mountain of purest brillance burning with intolerable fires. It was the essence of life. Raft felt himself, his whole body, swinging toward that kindling torch.

His mind swept toward it. His soul swung out across the abyss.

The thunder crashed deafeningly against the walls. The Flame brightened, blazed and towered—pulsing with eagerness—mad with delight—with ecstasy of living.

Beneath him, Raft saw, was a darker shape. Two shapes. The silhouette of a man, standing beside a machine that was curiously familiar.

Parror! And the device he had built from the First Race's records!

AS THE Flame brightened, Raft sprang toward the descending ramp. He raced down it, praying that he would be in time. That unchecked violence—Parror might not recognize the symptoms, blinded as he was with egotism—but Raft knew that the Flame was wakening uncontrolled.

The spark in the amulet had not reacted in this manner.

The galactic force of a nebula—raging unchecked in Paititi. Perhaps loosed on the whole world!

Down he raced, toward his quarry, while the fires brightened. They blazed with supernal brilliance and began to fade. The column of light slowly sank unwillingly. The thunders subsided.

Now Raft stood on the glassy, transparent floor of the cave. He looked down once, and reeled dizzily. He was standing unsupported above a gulf that dropped down to earth's burning center.

He dashed toward Parror. And Parror ran to meet him.

The light came from below, casting curious shadows on the man's face. Raft saw he was wearing one of the talon-gauntlets, snarling silently as he charged. Raft had no objection

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to killing Parror, but quelling the Flame was more important. He slowed, pulling the safety fuse from his belt.

"Parror!" he shouted, in the stillness as the thunders died. "Your machine's out of control! This will restrain it."

Parror did not even hear. He was lost in a berserker blood-thirst, blind and nearly insane with the demon's rage that Raft had seen before. His clawed fingers, tipped with sharp steel, slashed at Raft's face.

Raft did not duck quickly enough. His cheek was laid open, agonizing pain darting through him. The fuse spun from his grasp.

He closed with Parror or tried to. That agile body leaped out of reach. Again the claw ripped down, and again. A blaze of pain stung Raft's chest and side. Raft struck out savagely, but Parror eluded his driving fists.

Thunder crashed. The light from below brightened.

The Flame leaped from its bondage, bellowing with delight! The fires surged up—poured up—sprang high as though trying to return to their interstellar cradle.

Again the claw reached out.

Raft felt a razor drawn across one eye, and sight was suddenly altered. Half-blinded, his cheek torn to the bone, his nose almost ripped away, he sent blow after blow at his elusive enemy.

Janissa ran in, threw herself between them.

Parror balled his fist and struck her hard and clean upon the jaw. The girl was flung back, to crumple motionless on that glassy floor.

"You taught me that, Raft," Parror purred.

Raft mouthed frenzied curses. If he could only get his hands on that smiling devil, sink his fingers into that bearded neck.

Intolerably bright blazed the Flame. The thunders raved and crashed within the cavern. This time the star-kindled fires did not sink.

Higher they rose, and higher—questing—eager. Wakening from slumber to a life beyond the conception of earthly minds!

Suddenly, amazingly, Raft could see from both eyes again. The agony in face and body was gone. The dripping of blood had stopped. He saw a look of amazement cross Parror's face.

The radiations from the Flame healed. They rejuvenated living tissue with miraculous speed. They hastened life.

Craddock's voice cried something. Raft could make out only a word or two through the thunder, but he saw Craddock, thirty feet away, running toward the distant machine. In Craddock's hand was a foot-long cylinder Raft recognized.

Raft never knew what Parror thought was happening. He saw the cat-man whirl, cry out in a thick, furious voice, and take one step after Craddock.

One step. No more. For then Raft had him.

But it was not easy. Raft had never battled a jaguar, but he was battling one now. The mad, raging fury that filled Parror had turned him into a wild beast. The eyes were all green now, blazing with hatred and blood-thirst. Writhing, struggling, gasping, the two crashed down together.

THE Flame rose ever higher. The thunders were an intolerable ache drumming against Raft's skull. That shadowless, intergalactic light burned into his brain.

The claw tore at his face, and instantly the wounds healed.

Snarling, as helpless in the grip of murder-lust as Parror himself, Raft surged to his knees, with an effort not even his enemy's strength could resist. Nothing existed, for a flashing, crimson second, but that red-stained claw.

He caught Parror's arm in a judo grip, and broke it with savage fury.

For a moment he held the man motionless. That was enough. The power of the Flame healed bone and tissue, but Parror's wrist and lower arm jutted out at an impossible angle.

But he fought on, with teeth and nails and feet, though Raft's fingers were clawed deep into his throat. Inexorably, with the blind savagery of his kind, he fought on until not even the Flame could bring life back to his strangled body.

Then Raft looked up.

Far across the cavern stood the machine on its tripod, perilously close to the Flame itself. And moving painfully toward it, like a man breasting a strong wind, was Craddock?

Craddock?

Something about that shape made Raft catch his breath. The outline was altering even as he watched. Raft remembered Craddock's maimed hands, and the power that had destroyed them, the same star-born energy that now thundered through the cavern in burning ecstasy of awareness.

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The figure still gripped the fuse-cylinder.

Raft got to his feet. He began to run after Craddock, but the distance was too great. Nearly at the machine now, the figure was fantastic.

It was not Craddock. It was not even human any more.

The living flesh boiled and altered and flowed under the monstrous force that could create whole universes. Something utterly inhuman, at last, stumbled and dragged itself forward into the full blaze of the radiation.

And yet there was a human purpose.

It reached the machine. For an instant it crouched there, adjusting the fuse. Beyond it, Curupuri shouted in cataclysmic fury as the fires poured torrentially up from the abyss. One instant of utter madness, while the power of universes, of galaxies, stooped and touched that cavern—

One instant—and then the thunders died.

The Flame pulsed once, twice, and sank. With a sigh almost human, the fires of life dwindled and dropped into the great gulf.

Remained, far below, a point of light, burning with unquenchable fires!

Harnessed!

The fire that had come from beyond the stars was harnessed.

Tamed—chained—by the flesh to which it had once, long ago, given life. . . .

Janissa stirred.

Fear came into her eyes. She raised herself against Raft's supporting arm to look around questioningly. Then her gaze came back to Raft's.

"It's over, Janissa," he said. "The Flame sleeps."

"The machine is working?"

"Yes. Parror had made a duplicate of ours, after all. But he didn't have the safety fuse. Once Craddock inserted that, it worked."

"But Craddock?"

"He's dead," Raft said quietly. "He died, I suppose, because he had to. The man who once wakened the Flame died to quell it again. This time, I think, the danger is over forever."

She watched him.

"I tested the machine," he said. "It's exactly what's needed. The First Race were right, after all. They waited too long to build their own machine, or they'd never have become monsters. Anyway, the Flame will burn, will send out its radiations, at this normal rate forever."

"Normal?"

RAFT nodded. "I altered the adjustment. Not to the danger-point, but so that metabolism in Paititi will be the same as metabolism in my own world. There's no barrier now. The talismans aren't necessary."

"I can live in your world? It won't be—slow?"

"Your world or mine, Janissa," he said. "You can choose."

But she had chosen already. And so had Raft. He had made his decision long ago, he thought, the first time he had seen Janissa's face in the little mirror. She had drawn him across the miles into the lost land where the Flame from infinity had burned and, after all, there was no choice. What problems the future might hold could be solved, somehow.

"We need not go back through the cavern of the monsters," she said. "There is a way to reach the unseen road from here."

Raft's lips found hers.

But he was thinking: My world will be strange to you, Janissa. I will make you happy, if I can. And I think I can, for I love you.

But will you turn back, sometimes, and remember? Will you remember Paititi, and the great trees that hold up the sky? Will you remember the castle above Doirada Gulf, where the white cloud from the cataract hangs forever in the sky?

Will the heritage of the jaguar stir in your blood, Janissa, to memories I cannot share? Or will you find contentment in my world?

Silently Raft let Janissa guide him toward the way that led to freedom, and to a destiny he could not foretell. But the girl's hand lay warm in his, and that, for the while, was enough of an answer for them both.

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Next Issue's Headliners: OTHER EYES WATCHING, a Novel of the Fourth Dimension by POLTON CROSS—THE DIMENSION OF CHANCE, a Hall of Fame Classic by CLARK ASHTON SMITH — and MANY OTHER STORIES and FEATURES!

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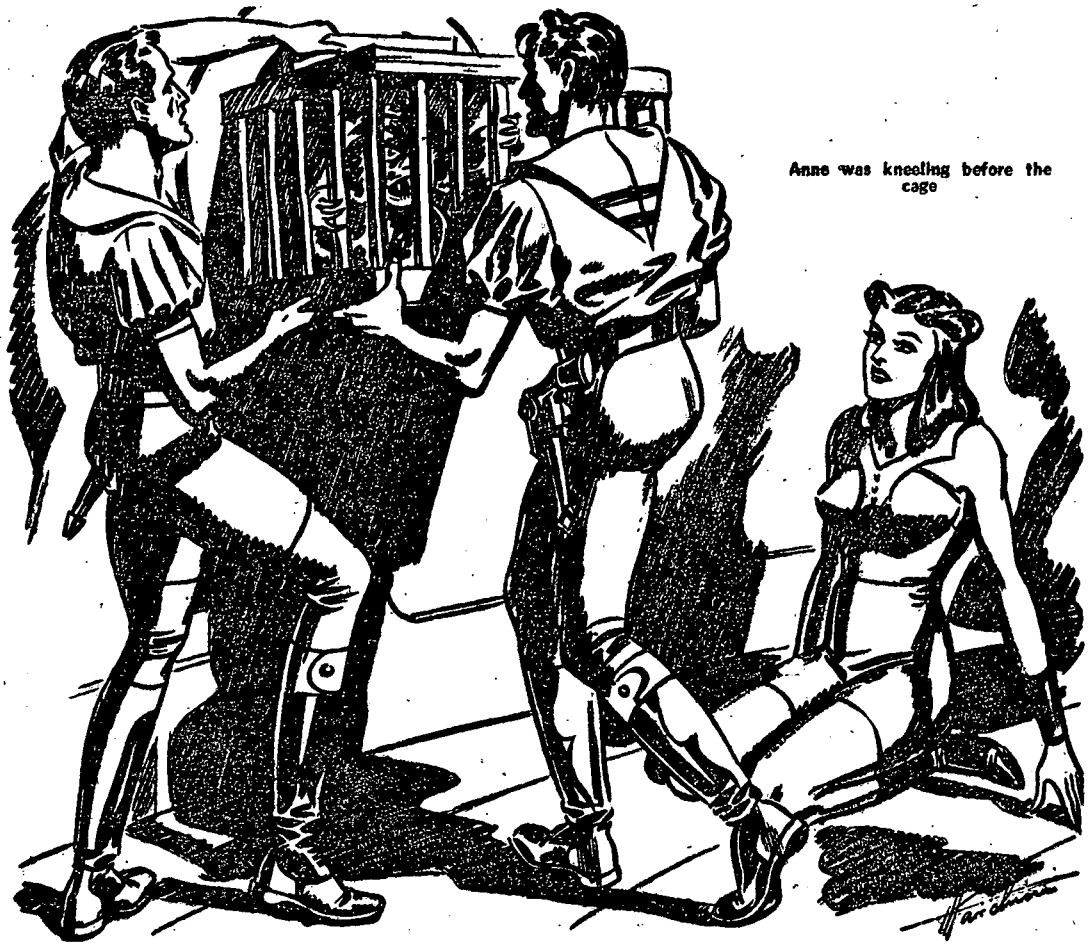

Anne was kneeling before the cage

SHADOW OVER VENUS

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

Commander James Elwood battles desperately for life when the Venusian gules take over the minds of his space-ship crew!

From dawn to dusk
The Gule sits in its cage
Only the Gule
Which sits so quietly in its cage
Knows why the long grass withers
Only the Gule knows why sorrow dogs our footsteps
And destroys the work of our hands.
Venusian folk chant.

THORN came into the cabin briskly and saluted.

"Tomlison's here, sir," he said. "He has five native bearers and he's coming aboard without so much as a by your leave."

Commander James Elwood leaped up, his boyishly handsome face suffused with joy. He felt like shouting, sobbing with relief and turning a series of handsprings across the deck.

Perhaps that was only natural, after what had happened.

Elwood shut his eyes, visualizing a steamy jungle land stretching away to limitless horizons. A heavily bearded young man stood in a clearing, staring straight before

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him. His lips were sun-blistered and he was sweating in every pore.

For a moment the young man swayed, gnawing at his underlip. Then, with a convulsive shudder, he straightened, and walked forward with an indescribable shining something in his stare which hadn't been there an instant before.

From a sloping gray boulder another man, older, gaunter, but more composed, arose and extended his hand. The youth halted. He spoke in a voice that was half a sob.

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" he said.

The vision vanished.

Having pried loose from humanity's buried past a nugget which had remained untarnished after three hundred years, the Commander of the Morning Star felt better able to cope with the unbelievable implications of his own splendid accomplishment.

Henry Tomlison was probably the greatest explorer of the Twenty-second Century. But the primeval forests of Venus had swallowed him as completely as the Africa of Stanley's day had swallowed Livingstone.

He'd simply disappeared. Disappeared so completely that for months and years not a whisper concerning him had filtered out of that pestilence-ridden wilderness to shatter the inviolacy of his renown.

At irregular intervals supplies had been dropped from low-flying planes by men who had forgotten the lessons learned in the swamplands of Mimas, the trackless deserts of Mars. To stay alive in a completely alien environment a man must not stop to set up a camp or attempt exploration on a systematic scale. He must go and return quickly, for after the first few days it becomes increasingly difficult for puny man to war with the mighty forces of the unknown.

It was an altogether incredible moment for both Elwood and his first officer. They had hardly dared hope that Tomlison would come walking out of the jungle with specimen cages and native bearers in his wake. True the visionaries, who had financed the rescue expedition, had anticipated the appearance of just such a gaunt, haggard-eyed apparition beneath the Morning Star's yawning gravity ports. But Elwood was a practical man who did not believe in miracles.

Now, seemingly, a miracle had taken place.

ELWOOD swung about, his body taunt.

"All right, Thorn. Get aft and order the derricks lowered. I'm going down to the airlock embrasure, and welcome him aboard."

"You'll find him changed, sir," Thorn said. "He walks with a limp and he seems to have picked up a tic. His face keeps twitching."

"Tick? Oh—you mean a tic?"

Thorn nodded grimly. "I mean a nervous tic, yes. But for all I know there may be ticks on the little beast he's bringing aboard. It's a gule, sir."

Elwood started. "A gule," he said, slowly. "A Gule, eh? Does it resemble the one we saw in the jungle?"

"See no reason why it shouldn't, sir," Thorn said. "Those little animals are as alike as peas in a pod. Spectral tarsierlike, I'd say."

"A spectral tarsier crossed with a midget tree sloth," Elwood grunted, "couldn't begin to take on the appearance of a gule. But if Tomlison is bringing one aboard he must have a reason. The creature doesn't use its scent organs indiscriminately—I hope."

"I don't believe it does, sir," Thorn said. "In fact, I'm sure the creature is as harmless as it looks. Otherwise the natives wouldn't trust themselves within ten yards of it."

"Okay, fella. Now suppose you get those derricks lowered. I don't know why we're standing here discussing Venusian fauna when Tomlison is coming aboard."

"In exalted moments the mind concentrates on trivilities," Thorn said. "That's the answer, sir."

"All right, but get below. Get below before the way you feel blows you apart."

"Yes, sir."

Thorn saluted, turned and strode off, his lips set in tight lines.

Five minutes later Elwood stood in a narrow lock embrasure, staring down at an extraordinary spectacle. Tomlison was leading a procession of sweating Venusian natives up the long airlock ramp. His face was haggard, his lips sun-blistered, and he was still wearing the remnants of the suit which had accompanied him into the jungle.

The natives were trailing him with lowered heads, sunlight glinting on their bare green-blue bodies, their huge, six-digited feet making a padding sound on the metallic ramp. Although Elwood knew that they were considerably more intelligent than the great apes of Earth he found himself wondering if he'd be able to reconcile himself to their presence aboard his ship.

They were without moral scruples, and would as soon slit a man's throat as accept

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food from him in a bowl, then squat with a pretense of friendliness at his feet.

On the broad shoulders of the hindmost bearer there reposed an enormous wooden cage occupied by a small, black and furry creature which kept weaving back and forth a few inches from the bars.

Elwood found himself wondering whether the animal had been caught and put into the cage by Tomlison, or whether it had walked into a cage, prepared for it by the natives, and trapped itself.

It was curious he should find himself speculating about the animal in the cage when Tomlison was coming up the ramp with a lurching unsteadiness in his gait.

The animal wasn't important. Only Tomlison was important—Tomlison lost five years in the jungle and now miraculously restored to his rightful place in the sun.

Elwood caught his breath. Tomlison had seen him and was waving a greeting. The great explorer's hand flashed in the sunlight, his head came up.

"Hello, up there!" he called.

It was a startlingly casual greeting, almost blithe, as though Tomlison were making an effort to convince his rescuers that his long sojourn in the wilderness had been just a trivial incident which could be dismissed with a shrug.

But there was something about his expression which disturbed Elwood and convinced him that the explorer was putting on an act, a deliberate effort at deception.

About what?

The answer came with appalling suddenness.

Tomlison had increased the rapidity of his stride and was almost at the summit of the ramp when the haggard anxiety in his stare turned to stark terror.

He swung about, dropped to one knee and clapped his hands to his head. Instantly the natives behind him halted, their lidless eyes fixed on him in dull astonishment.

FOR ONE awful instant Tomlison seemed to be trying to defend himself frantically against something that had no material existence. His arm flailing the empty air, he dragged himself forward like a baited animal with its leg caught in a trap.

Again and again his arms lashed out and his knee shot up, but he couldn't seem to drag his leg out from the trap.

As Elwood stared in stunned horror, the man before him, a man who had never known fear, screamed hoarsely and made a final, frantic effort to rise. Then his whole body went limp. He slumped, a low moan escaping from his lips.

When Elwood reached his side, he was lying in a crumpled heap, his eyes wide and staring. . . .

Later, while walking along the between-deck passageway which led to the ship's laboratory, Elwood felt a cold horror gnawing at his vitals. In a scant half-hour he had lived five lifetimes, and—watched his world collapse about him like a house of cards.

That world had been built around the rescue of Tomlison. For eighteen months he had lived for nothing else, thought of nothing else. Thirty-six times he had brought his ship down and risked death in a hundred hideous forms. At each landing he had set up camp in the deep jungle, and cut his way through pest-infested jungle and floundered across shallow swamps with the suffocating odor of rotting vegetation in his nostrils and a churning horror in the depths of his mind.

Thirty-six turns of a hideous wheel that had stopped five times before a mound of Venusian skulls, twice before the charred embers of a fire built by natives who had fled at his approach, and once before a low-roofed, hutlike structure made of wooden stakes set close together and driven deeply into the weed-choked soil.

Elwood had entered the hut and stared through the bars of a small wooden cage at the shining eyes of a strange little animal with thick black fur on every inch of its lithe, slothlike body.

For an instant he had crouched in the sticky darkness, his heart thudding against his ribs. Then, close to the cage, the humid air had seemed to thicken. A cloying odor had assailed his nostrils, causing him to gasp, half-suffocated.

He had left in a hurry.

Now, with Tomlison's notebooks clutched tightly in his hand, he was sorry he hadn't endured a trivial unpleasantness and waited in the darkness for a native to creep into the hut.

For he knew now that the natives visited the hut to stare at the little animal. Not to worship the animal, but to laugh and jeer at it, to hurl sticks and stones at it.

Why? He wondered! Would he ever know? Would he ever discover the truth, with Tomlison lying stretched out on a cot

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in the sick bay, unable to move or speak?

The laboratory door was ajar. Cold light slanted out into the passageway, cascading over Elwood's slightly stooped shoulders, accentuating the pallor of his face.

With a grimace he threw the door wide and stepped into a blaze of light that seemed to follow him as he crossed the room. At the far end of the laboratory a slender young woman was seated, peering into a microscope. It was Anne Buckmaster. Before she could turn, he'd taken her into his arms and had pushed the microscope back across the table with his elbow.

"I'm keeping the natives on board," he said. "So far I've not been able to get much out of them. But I intend to keep trying."

"You'd be foolish to send them back into the jungle before we know what struck Tomlison down," Anne said. "Or after, for that matter."

She slipped out of his embrace and stood very white and still, staring at him.

"And I must say you picked a very strange time to kiss me," she added.

"I'm sorry if it upset you," Elwood answered.

"I didn't say it upset me. I just said you picked a strange time."

Elwood had a sudden qualm. A breeze was blowing in from the jungle through the open gravity port at her back. Blowing in and ruffling a coppery strand of her hair.

He was tempted to swing about and close the port. He did not approve of leaving the ports open when difficult experiments were being conducted.

But Anne Buckmaster objected to working in a humid laboratory, and he did not care to argue with her. Not only was he deeply in love with her, but she was the head of his research staff.

For one thing, she was so young and eager. Yesterday he had felt young himself, as young as a man of thirty-seven could ever feel. But now he felt old enough to be her father.

HE WALKED to the open port and stood for an instant staring out at a green sea of vegetation, his arms pressed to his side. When he swung about his face was contorted.

"Tomlison's notebooks are crammed with coldly objective observations," he said. "A man spends five years in a virgin wilderness, living cheek by jowl with natives who are scarcely human, resting when he can in a pest-hooded sleeping bag and stealing forth by night to crouch on his haunches like an animal and listen to the small sounds of the jungle.

"And all the while he's filling his notebooks with jottings—the incredible life-cycles of unbelievable bugs, plants and lizards, the weird harvesting rites and burial customs of the natives. There are one thousand closely written pages of observational minutae, and absolutely nothing else. This record is so impersonal, so lacking in emotional overtones, it reads as though it had been written by a robot."

Elwood laughed harshly. "A genius of a robot, of course. A great Audubonlike naturalist of a robot, but a robot notwithstanding. Elwood hasn't told us one thing about himself. How he felt, what he thought his chances were of being rescued, whether he wanted to be rescued even. Not a line."

Anne looked at him. "And now he's lying in the sickbay in a cataleptic trance."

"If you want to call it that."

Anne compressed her lips thoughtfully. "Is there anything in his journal which would justify us in making chemical and biological tests of his hair, his skin, his clothing to discover what struck him down?"

Elwood winced. "You talk as though you wished there were."

"No, I'm just being realistic. If there's some virulent disease on Venus which can strike down a man who's spent five years in that forest right when he's nodding and smiling and waving a greeting, we ought to know about it."

She lowered her gaze. A small flying insect had alighted on her arm, and was furtively exploring the smooth contours of her elbow. The creature was a brilliant emerald green, with gauzy wings and peanut shaped head. It looked startlingly like a lantern bug. For an instant its resemblance to that ludicrous terrestrial insect brought a smile to Anne's lips.

Then, startled, she straightened, and a look of horror came into her face.

The insect had lowered its head and was grasping a tiny fold of her flesh in its furiously working mandibles. As she continued to stare it reared abruptly, and where its mouth parts had rested there gleamed two welling incisions, ruby red in the cold light.

With a startled cry Elwood leapt toward her. "Don't move," he warned, hoarsely. "If

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it bites you again, you won't live thirty minutes."

He broke off abruptly, his free hand lashing out. Whiplike, his fingers flicked across her elbow.

There was an ominous buzzing, a flash of green.

Angrily the insect rose into the air and encircled the laboratory. Around and around in narrowing circles that seemed to tighten like a noose around Elwood's pulsing throat.

It alighted suddenly, its wings outspread. Elwood sucked in his breath and flicked his fingers across his suddenly tingling cheek.

The tingling did not stop.

He stood very still, his lips ashen. The insect was crawling slowly across his cheek. But he knew it hadn't bitten him—yet. The stab when it came would be unmistakable. He didn't want it to come.

Anne moved swiftly close to him, her hand whipping up.

"Hold still, darling," she warned.

With a convulsive shudder Elwood lowered his eyes. Unbelievably the creature was on the floor. Anne's knuckles had dislodged it, and it was now trying to right itself, awkwardly attempting to take off again.

With a choking sob Elwood stepped forward and suddenly brought his heel down upon it.

Furiously, again and again.

A moment later he was staring down at a damp green spot on the deck, his temples thudding. Then he saw that Anne was swaying. He stepped forward and caught her in his arms.

"Tomlison's notes!" a voice was screaming in Elwood's brain. "Lantern insect, deadly as a cobra! Get her to sick bay. Hypodermic. Benzosulphinid is the only known antidote. Sick bay. Benzosulphinid."

The between-deck passageways had never seemed so long.

Staggering on numbed legs he carried his now completely limp burden to the end of the dimly lighted corridor, mounted a spiral staircase, and entered a wider, brighter corridor which led to—to—

His senses swam, as though he'd been dosed with an opiate. The sick bay. Must get her to the sick bay.

SUDDENLY as he swayed a cuddy door burst open, and a white face swam unsteadily toward him. The face of Thorn!

Elwood started violently, then shook his head as he took in the whole of Thorn. Legs that seemed as unsteady as his own, a chest that rose and fell, features that were a glaring mask of horror.

Thorn was shouting something, his shoulders jerking.

"Listen to me, sir. You've got to listen! The ship's infested with lantern insects. They've come in through the open gravity ports and they're clinging to every bulkhead where there's an inch of sky opening on the jungle. I know it sounds odd, sir. Rarest insect on Venus and they've never been known to swarm . . . Good grief! What's happened to Anne Buckmaster?"

Thorn stopped, as though his mind were not capable of shaping the words he wanted to say.

"She's been bitten," Elwood heard himself replying. "I'm taking her to the sick bay. Tomlison's notes say benzosulphinid will neutralize the poison if it's administered hypodermically within fifteen minutes."

Relief replaced the horror in Thorn's stare.

"Then there's hope for the crew, sir. Four of the men were bitten. I've been trying to reach you through the intership communicator. We've locked up all the cuddies with gravity ports opening on the jungle. We ought to be able to kill them off by flooding the cuddies with carbon monoxide."

"All right," Elwood snapped. "Get the bitten men to the sick bay first."

Fifteen minutes later Anne Buckmaster was sitting up on a cot that seemed too narrow even for her small body.

"I'm not going to die?" she asked.

"No, you're going to be all right," Elwood said, patting her shoulder reassuringly. He drew a shaky breath. "By now they're dropping from the aerators in every part of the ship. With the aerators working it shouldn't take long to get the gas out."

"But flooding the cuddies with carbon monoxide fumes was risky, wasn't it?" Anne asked. "Terribly risky?"

She was sitting up straight now, her eyes on his face. Bending over, he drew the blankets up about her chin. He shook her gently.

"Not any more risky than not flooding them would have been," he said. "Now lie down and try to get some rest."

HE TURNED as he spoke, staring across the sick bay at the sleeping forms which lay sprawled in neat white cots against

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the opposite bulkhead.

"What you need is a chaperon," he said. "We ought to have separate wards for patients of the opposite sex."

"They're not disturbing me, Jim."

"No," Elwood said. "They're all asleep. Why can't you get some rest?"

"Because I've been thinking, Jim. It couldn't have been an accident. If some force we can't begin to fathom drew thousands of those insects here, there must have been a malignant intelligence behind it all."

Elwood's lips tightened.

"Good night," he said, gently, and turned and strode from the sick bay.

In the corridor Thorn intercepted him again. Thorn was nervous, trembling.

"We found one of the natives in the engine room, sir," he said. "He was monkeying with one of the cylinders."

Elwood's pale face went a shade whiter.

"When we collared him, sir, he shrieked and went into a trance. Then he started chanting the Gull song, with variations. You remember—the curious little song which Tomlison recorded in his journals?"

Elwood gripped his first officer by the arm. "Can you remember the exact words. Think hard. It's important."

"Well, not the exact words," Thorn said. "Venusian is a pretty hard language to translate. But it went something like this:

'From dawn to dusk
The Gull sits in its cage
Only the Gull
Which sits so quietly in its cage
Knows why death comes on swift wings.'"

A fear, verging on panic, set up a prickling at the base of Elwood's scalp.

"I'm going down and have another look at that little animal," he said. "Then I mean to take a look at the cylinder you say the native was monkeying with when you grabbed him."

"It's still revolving," Thorn said.

Elwood started. "Still revolving?"

Stark nodded grimly. "The crazy, gibbering devil wedged himself in the control box and did something to the vibratory mechanism. Now the cylinder is giving off a weird, unearthly droning. It's enough to set your teeth on edge, sir. He twisted the pins around in a very ingenious way. I could have stopped the cylinder by turning off the ignition, of course. But I wanted you to hear it."

"All right," Elwood said. "We'll go down and inspect it. But not before I've had another look at that little animal."

Five minutes later the two men stood in a narrow, brightly lighted compartment directly above the crews quarters, staring into the wooden cage which had come aboard on the broad back of a native.

It wasn't on the back of a native now, however.

It stood on a cold, unmoving deck, and the furry shape within was staring out at them in sulky defiance, its tiny paws thrust into the loose folds of its body pouch.

Elwood leaned forward suddenly, cupping his hands.

"Hiya, pal?" he shouted.

Protesting shrilly, the weird little animal scuttled into the back of its cage and unhurriedly elevated its scent organs.

Hastily Elwood whipped out a handkerchief, and pressed it to his nostrils.

"If they just kept them as pets I could understand it," he said. "Neolithic man kept a weird assortment of pets and the Venusians are neolithic stage primitives."

"Do you suppose the natives worship these animals?" Thorn asked.

The question seemed to disturb Elwood more than he cared to admit.

"Nonsense! If they were sacred animals the natives would treat them with respect. Tomlison says that the Venusians badger these creatures unmercifully. The children throw sticks and stones at them, and the adults watch their antics with guffaws of mirth."

"Proving, sir?"

"I'm not trying to prove anything," Elwood snapped. "I'm merely saying that long low hut we saw in the jungle couldn't have been a house of worship. And since Neolithic stage barbarians couldn't grasp the rudiments of comparative zoology you may be sure it wasn't a zoo."

"Yes, sir," Thorn said. "And if we don't get out of here fast, sir, our best friends won't tell us."

THE engine room was a reek of smoke. The auxiliaries, which were picking up acceleration from the continuously revolving central shaft—the "cylinder"—had a straining-at-the-leash look. Indeed, the engine room seemed to be bursting with energies which would have welcomed a chance to carry the ship up through the steamy Venusian atmosphere into the cold night of space.

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But that could not be accomplished while the engine room crew sat about in wilted dungarees on enormous tanks which contained the fuel supply. All seven of the tanks were securely capped, but in each there slumbered, like a monstrous jinnee, a blast potential capable of blowing a hole in a "strip" of steel plating seven miles thick.

"Hear that droning?" Thorn said. "Does it remind you of anything, sir?"

The engine room grease-monkeys had leaped to attention, and were staring at Elwood with the haggard-eyed resentment of men too long grounded. Patience and fortitude they had once possessed in abundance, but now—now! Oh, why couldn't the "old man" realize that Tomlison had put a curse on the ship? Why couldn't he realize that you couldn't keep a ship with a curse on it grounded without running the risk that it would become a dead ship.

Also there was an indescribable bursting pressure inside their heads, as though they were already dead and were being galvanized into muscular activity by an urgency too ghastly to be endured.

Elwood could sense the mood of the men. He knew that it boded no good and possibly harbored the seeds of an active evil.

For a moment he stood listening to the drone of the cylinder, a strained intensity in his stare.

"Suggest anything, sir?" Thorn reiterated.

"No. I can't say that it does."

Elwood gripped his subordinate's arm. "Wait a minute! That droning is so high in pitch the cylinder could—must—be giving off subsonic vibrations as well."

"That's right," Thorn said. "I've an idea that cylinder could be monkeyed with till it would torture a tuning fork seven ways to Christmas. That's because it happens to be hollow, and the longitudinal vibrations of air in a cylindrical pipe could be made to cover the entire range of sound right up to the kind of waves psychologists tell us could send a man running into the jungle seeking escape or death."

Elwood turned pale. "Are you trying to tell me that native crawled into the control box with the deliberate intention of making readjustments which would drive us all mad? Do you realize what kind of special skill that would take?"

"It has been confirmed experimentally that prolonged exposure to sound waves of subsonic frequency can drive animals mad," Thorn pointed out. "Just how sound waves too shrill to be heard can affect the brain we don't know but guinea pigs do, and we seem to be learning. We seem to be learning, sir!"

Elwood didn't answer. He was pressing his palms to his temples as though fearful that the bursting tension inside his skull would split his brain assunder.

"But that isn't all, sir," Thorn said. "As you know, Tomlison made some enormously amplified tonal recordings of the wing friction chirrups of a great variety of Venusian insects. Most Venusian insects produce mating calls by a friction of a file on the underside of their forewings, precisely as Katydids do.

"But the female lantern insect, which has a much more powerful and complicated vibratory mechanism, can transmit mating calls over a distance of several miles. I took the liberty of running off the audiofilm recording which Tomlison made of those calls, sir.

"In frequency and vibratory pitch they correspond exactly with the sounds we're hearing now. That droning would draw thousands of male lantern insects to the ship as surely as would the 'chirrupings' of a thousand females."

He laughed harshly. "Would and did! That native crawled into the control box a few minutes after he came aboard."

"Good gosh!" Elwood choked.

"That crude barbarian climbed into the control box and with a few deft manipulations converted an auxiliary engine cylinder into a double-purpose sound transmitter. And what a sound transmitter! Just to prove its versatility it imitates the mating calls of lethal insects in the low voice while it blandly proceeds to drive us mad in the high voice."

ELWOOD took a deep breath. There was no color at all in his face now.

"All right, you can turn it off," he said. "I've heard it. I don't know whether we can make that native cough up the secret of his know-how, but we can try."

"Any instructions, sir?"

"Yes. I want you to go to the lab, and hook up the hypnotic disk apparatus. Then wheel it to Cuddy V-Seven."

"Very well, sir."

After leaving the engine-room, the hiss of steam followed Elwood as though he had stepped on a cobra which had slipped out from under his heel and was rearing up to

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bury its fangs in his neck.

But it wasn't until he stood facing a native who refused to return his stare, a native who whimpered abjectly and cringed and pleaded that something flickered across his face that might have been horror.

For a moment it was a little difficult for him to realize that he had passed in ten brief minutes from the engine room to a wide, circular compartment filled with ugly shadows, seized the native and strapped him to a chair.

In appearance the native was no different from the five other Venusians who had come aboard with Tomlison. His compact, heavily muscled frame, totally bald head and smooth, almost expressionless face were in striking contrast to the rangy form and haggard visage of the Earthman.

But terror shone in the barbarian's slitted eyes as he returned Elwood's stare, shone forth unmistakably despite the fact that the lineaments of his face did not move at all.

Elwood had never really mastered the Venusian tongue. His knowledge of the language was rudimentary at best. But in a moment the door would open, and Thorn would come in, wheeling before him a glittering object on wheels.

Under hypnosis the native would cease to speak in monosyllables and the questioning could start in earnest. Under hypnosis the native would start babbling. And a torrent of language was always revealing, because in a torrent there would be few sentences a man could understand.

Elwood bent suddenly and gripped the native by the shoulders. He shook him violently.

"Motion-maker!" he demanded. "Motion-maker down under. How did you know how to bring kill bug to ship by changing motion-maker?"

The Venusian sat for a while without answering, staring dully at the opposite bulkhead.

"No remember," he said.

"Oh, you don't remember!"

"No remember."

The door opened. Thorn, his face gleaming with perspiration, pushed the hypnotic disk apparatus into the room, swabbed his brow with his sleeve, turned around and shut the door firmly behind him.

"Am I glad to see you!" Elwood muttered.

"What shall I do with it, sir?"

Elwood gestured toward the native. "Wheel it up in front of him. That's it. Now plug it in and turn it on."

Five minutes later a blur of whirring light was making the native blink. The Venusian didn't seem to fear the light. He sat staring at it as though fascinated. After a moment, he began to blink drowsily.

Elwood leaned sharply forward.

"What does the gule do?" he whispered softly. "What does the gule do?"

The native's lips moved. Just as softly he replied: "From dawn to dusk the gule sits in its cage. Only the gule knows what he does.

Then the prisoner uttered several rapid sentences.

A moment later Elwood was staring at the native in stunned horror. Although the first glimmerings of the truth had come to him a full hour previously, the confirmation was like a white-hot needle stabbing at his mind.

The Venusian soon fell into a deep trance. He sat slumped in his chair, his hands tightly clenched, the pupils of his eyes dilated.

Elwood stood as though turned to stone. Soon he tottered forward, gripped Thorn's arm and said in a voice which was edged with panic.

"Consciously the natives despise the gule, revile it, hurl sticks and stones at it. But subconsciously they live in mortal terror. Folk chants spring from the deep, subconscious fears which haunt the dreams of a people. I knew that if I could throw that poor gibbering devil into a trance I could get the truth."

"Just what is the truth, sir?" Thorn asked hoarsely.

"Haven't you guessed. The gule has telepathic powers and is infinitely more intelligent than the natives. It can get inside their minds and it can get inside our minds.

"But they treat its as an animal, sir. An animal in a cage. A grotesque, funny little animal, a kind of clownish pet!"

ELWOOD nodded. "That's just it!" he said. "Man, don't you see what a devilish, subtle scheme of domination that is? The gule is unbelievably intelligent, a big-brained animal with endowments which we possess only in the most rudimentary form. But it knows the natives are intelligent too—that their progress from barbarism to civilization might very well menace its supremacy. So it gets inside their minds and bends them to its will.

"Thorn, don't you see? It forces the na-

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tives to build those cages, brings about its own imprisonment the better to pull the wool over their eyes. It keeps them on a primitive level of culture by compelling them to destroy their own crops, their own flints and potsherds."

The lines of strain had deepened about Elwood's eyes.

"Remember how the song goes? 'Only the gule knows why the long grass withers. Only the gule knows why sorrow dogs our footsteps and destroys the work of our hands.' Oh, it's malignantly subtle. The natives haven't the remotest conscious suspicion that they're being dominated, controlled. If you had a ludicrous little pet in a cage, a pet without dignity, would it occur to you?"

"But would such a highly intelligent being be willing to surrender it's dignity, it's freedom?" Thorn gasped.

"Why not? You're expecting it to conform to our human conception of how a really superior being ought to behave. It simply doesn't, that's all. It's dignity means nothing to it if it can dominate. And if it can express itself through the minds it controls, it doesn't need freedom."

"Then you think it forced that native to crawl into the control box, eh?" Thorn asked.

"It did much more than that. It must have listened to Tomlison's recordings and memorized the exact pitch and frequency of the lantern insect's mating calls, exactly as a human musician would memorize a Bach fugue. Then it must have gotten inside the mind of the Chief Engineer, and discovered just how the cylinder could be manipulated to produce sound waves of the same pitch and frequency."

"That's horrible!"

"Then it must have forced the native to make those manipulations, staying inside the native's mind until the job was completed."

"How about us?" Thorn asked. "Why doesn't it stop us from talking now?"

Elwood took a deep breath. "It can get inside our minds, all right, but we seem to have a certain immunity. I'm almost certain it got inside Tomlison's mind and struck him down. But perhaps it couldn't have done so if the hardships he'd endured hadn't weakened him mentally and physically. You'll notice how careful he was to keep all strong personal emotion out of his journals. Probably he was trying to set up a mental barrier, so the creature wouldn't suspect he was planning to bring it back to Earth for further study. But the creature did suspect and it didn't want to be brought back."

In the silence which followed, Thorn's breathing could be heard. When he spoke his voice had a terrible quietness.

"Any instructions, sir?"

"Yes. We've got to blast off and blast off fast. The danger has taken hold here but in space we may have a chance. On Venus we're caught in a sort of mental crossfire from hundreds of cages in the jungle. But in space we'll just have that one little animal to deal with."

"You intend to deal with it, sir?"

"The instant we've passed the heavyside, Thorn. At least, I'm going to try. I'm going to try, Thorn!"

Thirty minutes later Elwood stood alone before a quartz-shielded observation port, wrestling with space nausea and watching the jungle fall away beneath him. How long he stood with his face pressed to the pane he had no way of knowing, for his thoughts were in a turmoil, and the drone of the auxiliaries was loud in his ears, drowning out the tick of the bulkhead chronometer.

But as he glanced up into the deep purple skies and then down at the great forest dwindling, blazing with a myriad of fiery emeralds, he told himself grimly that time did not matter so long as he accomplished what he had to do.

The Venusian twilight zone was like the chalice of a flower, an immense poisonous flower that could close its petals abruptly, imprisoning and crippling what it could not devour.

The sinister planet was dwindling rapidly now. A ribbon of violet crept around the green expanse of the rain forest, widened into a flowing belt of darkness where nothing could live.

At ninety thousand feet the atmosphere had thickened sufficiently to blot out the entire surface of Venus as though the dark and uninhabitable fenlands held secrets which the vapor enveloped was determined not to divulge.

For a while the fog banks continued to rise with the steadily rising ship, so that he seemed to be gazing down at a Gargantuan saucer wrapped in fog. Then the mists leveled off, and Venus emerged as a sphere, its glimmering convexity filling the viewport.

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TIME passed. Grimly Elwood was walking down a thrumming passageway to the door of the sick bay. He knew that every instant of delay now would bring the danger closer. It seemed very close when he approached the door, closer still when he flung it wide, and stood staring at Anne's empty cot and the sleeping forms which lay sprawled in grotesque attitudes against the opposite bulkhead.

For an instant the completely insane thought crossed his mind that in his absence, winds of the unknown had blown furiously into the compartment, changing the attitudes of the sleepers and removing one of their number.

A great shudder went through him, and he felt a cold fury rising in him, an intolerable sense of being at the mercy of something which he now loathed and hated with every fiber of his being.

He never quite knew how he reached the cuddy where a completely motionless little ball of fur crouched in shadows, its eyes bright with malign triumph. He had only a hazy recollection of a long journey through dimness, the unsteady movement of his legs under him—every step was a torment—as he jerked at the door with his hands.

Then he was crossing the cuddy with dragging steps, his temples thudding, his gaze riveted on the cage.

Anne was kneeling before the cage, her eyes wide and staring. She was fumbling with the bars of the cage, trying frantically to free the more than human thing which had taken possession of her mind.

Something utterly malign seemed to rush toward Elwood as he dragged himself toward her, a palpable force, as though the creature had gotten inside his mind, too, and was using it as an avenue of attack.

The muscles of his legs had begun to tighten and he was unable to move his arms. He heard the door rasp open behind him, but he was unable to turn.

He battled for the strength to make some move, but all control over his own body seemed to have drained from him.

"I'll get the port open, sir," he heard Thorn say.

Then Thorn's footsteps came shuffling along the deck, and there was the harsher rasp of an opening gravity port.

Suddenly life flowed back into Elwood's limbs and he found that he could move again. He moved toward Ann.

Anne screamed when he touched her. For an instant she recoiled, as though his humanness had become alien and intolerable to her, a thing not to be endured. They were both on their knees, breathing heavily.

"It's getting me now, sir," Thorn said hoarsely. "It's getting me. I can't resist any longer."

"I know," Elwood muttered. "It's concentrating on you now. A moment ago it was concentrating on me. It can't seem to get inside both our minds at the same time. Not with crippling power, anyway."

"Can you move freely now, sir?" Thorn whispered.

Elwood moved an arm.

"Yes. I think I can."

"I can't move at all, sir. But if you start lifting the cage it will try to stop you. Then I'll be free to try. If we work in relays, sir, we—we may be able to get that cage level with the port."

It seemed an almost impossible thing to accomplish, but it was worth trying.

"All right," Elwood said. "I'll start raising it."

"But careful," Thorn warned. "It can read our minds."

"Yes, but it knows one man can raise that cage alone. It will have to swing its weight back to me."

He was on his knees as he spoke, tugging at the base of the cage. He saw the glint of two peering eyes in the darkness behind the bars.

They grew larger suddenly, seemed to burn into his brain.

But he continued frantically to heave and tug until his whole body went numb. The cage was on his shoulders when Thorn seized it.

Instantly life flowed back into Elwood's limbs.

He grabbed the cage just as Thorn sagged. The cage was now level with the port. Straining, fighting off another sudden access of numbness he wrenched at the cords which held the door in place.

"Take it, Thorn," he shouted.

He stood rigid, unable to move, as Thorn's suddenly freed hand grasped the edge of the door.

In space a gravity port opened on a vortex of force which could suck dry in an instant any receptacle pressed lightly against it.

For one terrifying instant, as Elwood stared, he caught a mind-numbing glimpse

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of the convulsed gule. He saw a vermillion tongue shoot out, tiny claws unsheath themselves.

He saw a blur of flesh, and fur, and claws revolving.

Then the gule was gone!

Ten minutes later Elwood stood beside an intership communicator, responding with vigor to a message which was coming in over the disk.

"Tomlison's all right, you say? Sitting up? What did you say? Complaining? Says we must have gotten rid of the gule? Otherwise he wouldn't be sitting up. I see. Otherwise he wouldn't be alive. And he's disappointed, eh? Well, isn't that just too bad!"

With a savage grunt Elwood clicked off the disk and turned to face a smiling Anne Buckmaster.

"You wanted to rescue Tomlison," she said. "Well, you've rescued him. Now you ought to be as happy as a lark. You have everything a sensible man could wish for."

Elwood looked at her. "Everything?" he asked.

She smiled and drew close to him.

When he released her her eyes were shining.

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TWELVE HOURS TO LIVE!

By JACK WILLIAMSON

Captain David Grant is faced with a desperate choice when he is pursued by an implacable vandal in the interstellar void!

WEARILY, Captain David Grant paced the bridge, pausing at intervals to peer out with heavy-lidded eyes at the star studded blackness of interplanetary space, beyond the small round observation ports.

For three days the Queen of Night, Grant's rocket liner, had been pursued by the implacable vandal of the interstellar void, the Black Hawk.

For three days Captain Grant had kept his great space-liner, with her rich cargo of uranium salts from the mines on the outer satellite of Neptune and her hundreds of passengers, ahead of the questing disintergrator rays of the Black Hawk only by burning his full battery of reaction-motors at their maximum power.

And the fuel was almost gone—word had just come from the rocket rooms that the last chest of the radio active protonite had been opened. In a few minutes the great liner would be at the questionable mercy of the Black Hawk.

Slowly the vibrant humming of the motors, which had filled the great ship with a vital under-current of sound, died away.

The black pointer which indicated reaction-pressure crept back across its dial toward zero.

The Queen of Night was no longer accelerating her speed.

Watching keenly with tired eyes, Grant saw a vague pink glow come into being in the jet, star-sprinkled sky behind.

"Done for!" he groaned.

The glow, he knew, was a fluorescent, electronic discharge in the radioactive gases jetting from the rockets of racing ship. The Black Hawk was swiftly overtaking them!

"Man the rays!"

The Captain spoke the order into the black mouthpiece below the television screen. He tried in vain to keep hopelessness from his voice. For what chance had the two feeble ray tubes of the Queen of Night, against the powerful armament of the Black Hawk?

His mate's square face appeared on the screen.

"Man the rays it is, sir," came his voice.

Captain Grant turned quickly away, for he heard a light footstep and a match of gay song from beyond the bridge-room's entrance.

The avoil metal door swung open suddenly, and a gay, laughing sprite danced through.

"Nell! Nell! Darling—" the captain cried and his voice suddenly choked.

The radiant being ran across to him, in a fragrant mass of gleaming red-gold hair.

It was Captain Grant's lovely bride, whom he had married just before the beginning of the voyage. He had not told her of the vandal pursuing them—it had seemed to him a crime to blast her joyous happiness with helpless anxiety.

"What's the matter, Dave dear?" came her voice, half smothered in his embrace. "You seem worried lately—and you've been busy in here for three days and nights. You must sleep!"

"Look!" the Captain said, and pointed out through a port.

A thin sword of green stabbed across the blackness of the sky, darting like a wicked blade toward the liner.

"Oh, it's lovely!" she cried. "What is it, a comet?"

EDITOR'S NOTE

SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Twelve Hours to Live!" by Jack Williamson, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICATION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

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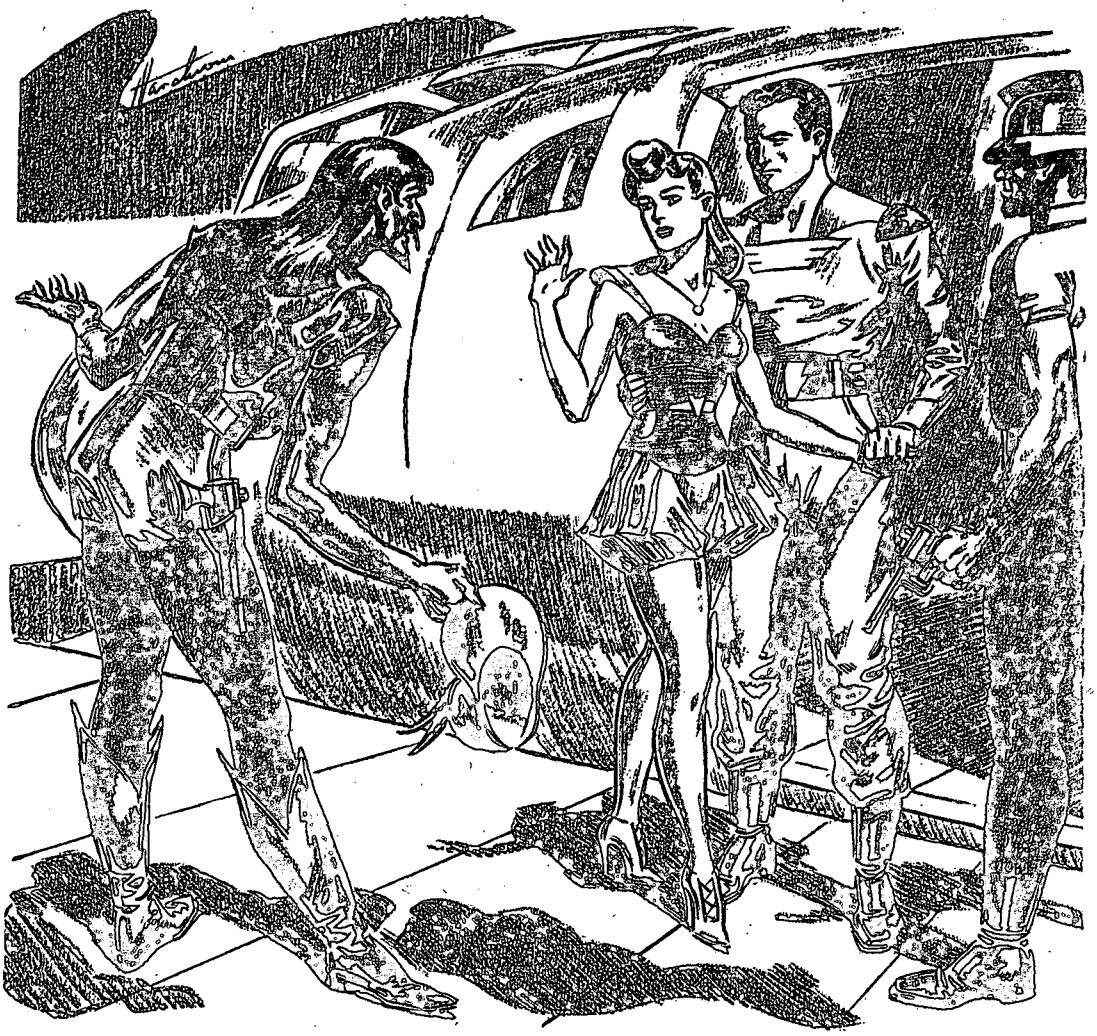

The space pirate bowed mockingly

His face grew white, his jaws set, lambent flame glowed in his blue eyes. His arms tightened fiercely about her.

"Nell, darling!" he cried.

He looked away, swallowed. In a moment he went on.

"I haven't told you, but the Black Hawk is after us. For three days we have been running for our lives. And it begins to look as if we had lost the race. You know it means—the Black Hawk! I didn't tell you; I didn't want you to worry."

Brown eyes looked up at him, wide with alarm.

"The Black Hawk! the pirate?" she cried. "But don't worry, Dave—I know you can fight him off!"

CAPTAIN GRANT'S eyes suddenly glistened, and he had to swallow again. He drew her close, kissed her shining mass of hair, her sweet face.

"Yes, we'll fight," he said fiercely. "We'll fight. And now you must go back below, dear. The bridge is too exposed, too dangerous."

"No, no!" she cried. "I'd rather stay with you."

Gently, he pushed her through the door.

Brushing the moisture from his eyes, he sprang back to the television screen, and began to give orders for the coming combat.

The humming song of the motors ceased. The indicator needle swung back to zero. The fuel was exhausted. The liner, drifting helpless, was completely at the mercy of the pursuing pirate.

And the pinkish glow in the sky behind grew more distinct, with the black outline of the pirate vessel in its center.

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Again and again, searching fingers of green flame reached out of that black ship. Green lances searching for the liner, to disintegrate the atoms of her armor into brown atomic dust, to cut away her walls so that the vital air would rush out, leaving passengers and crew asphyxiated in a frozen vacuum.

"Hold our fire," Grant ordered. "That's the only chance—wait until they are in easy range."

Minutes throbbed by.

The Black Hawk hurtled on toward the liner, until the sinister curves of its ebon hull were plainly visible.

Three times the green tongues of the pirate's disintergrating rays swept across the helpless ship. But the hull was not broken; the pirate sought to plunder rather than to destroy.

Captain Grant nervously paced the bridge. Each time the blasting green fire of the enemy rays had fallen upon them, he had turned uncertainly toward the television screen, with the order to fire trembling on his lips.

And each time he had checked himself.

"Wait, wait!" he had muttered again and again. "Not yet!"

At last the trim ebon length of the pirate vessel was close beside the liner, airfoils folded to her smooth hull, little jets of rosy flame hissing occasionally from her rockets to hold her in position.

"Do you surrender?" the query flicked from the heliograph of the enemy. A swinging mirror reflected the light of the distant sun.

"Fire!" Captain Grant shouted toward his television screen, by the way of answer.

The lone bow turret of the Queen of Night swung suddenly about. Twin narrow tongues of bright fire flashed from it like lances of emerald. The black hull of the pirate shone green where they struck.

A dreadful reply came from the Black Hawk.

Myriad arrowed rays leapt from her black length, sparkling jets of green radiance. They converged upon the silver-armored turret from which stabbed the two defensive beams.

Brown powder swirled away from the turret—neutronic dust, matter annihilated as such, when its electrons had been hurled into central protons by the ray.

The turret glowed green, crumpled, vanished.

A swirl of brown dust clouded the blackness of space.

Captain Grant groaned, and clutched the edge of an instrument panel until his knuckles shone white.

"Do you surrender?" The heliograph flashed again.

The captain made no move to reply. But he was without resource. He could neither fight nor run. He could merely pace up and down the bridge like a caged animal, as he watched the tiny auxiliary rockets putting off from the pirate, and darting across toward the liner, under cover of the threatening rays.

He was helpless as they fastened themselves upon the liner with magnetic clamps, and began cutting openings through her hull. He could only have the ship's meager supply of hand arms served out, and the crew stationed to repel the invaders.

The fighting was bloody but hopeless. Half an hour later the Queen of Night was in the hands of the individual who gave the same grim name, the Black Hawk, to himself and his ship alike.

NELL had come back to the bridge. She and the captain had barred the door. They were in each others' arms when it was broken down.

To Captain Grant's surprise, he and his bride were treated with elaborate, though mocking, courtesy. They were conducted to one of the auxiliary rockets attached to the doomed liner, and transported across to the black ship.

When the little vessel had slipped through the airlocks of the larger one, and they stepped from it, the Black Hawk himself greeted them.

A tall man, suavely polite, immaculately attired. His hair was long, lustrous, silken, brilliantly black.

Even his eyes, cold and mocking, were black as jet.

He bowed deliberately to Nell, and seized Captain Grant's hand with effusive mocking cordiality.

"Congratulations, Captain," he cried in a voice that was low, cold, and toneless. "Your defense was excellent, considering the disadvantages under which you struggled. Your flight, with the clever twists to evade me! Your cleverness in withholding your fire to the last moment! You have given the most diverting hours I have had in months. I am deeply in you debt."

"Thank you," the Captain said, ironically.

"I assure that I really owe you much," the Black Hawk insisted. "I see that you doubt my sincerity. To prove it, shall I grant some request for you?"

The lean, dark face of the pirate twisted into a cold, mocking smile that was almost a leer.

"Honestly, do you mean it?" the captain demanded, with eagerness and doubt mingled in his tone.

"Certainly. But name your wish."

"Will you spare my wife. Take her back to some civilized planet?"

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For long seconds, the dark visaged man stared at the captain and his lovely bride. Suddenly he appeared to think of something that pleased him hugely, for his white teeth gleamed in a sinister smile, and his black eyes flashed diabolically.

"With all my heart!" his cold voice cried. "And since I fear the lady would find little joy in a life without you, I shall also set you at liberty!"

With tears of joy in his eyes, the captain grasped the Black Hawk's cold hand.

"Come," the pirate said. "Forget the favor, if such it is. You have earned it. Your wife will be shown to her rooms, and we shall watch the fate of those prisoners who were not so fortunate as yourself."

The Black Hawk led Captain Grant away through the rocket's maze of passages, and a servant guided Nell to the luxurious stateroom.

The Captain never forgot the horror of what followed.

The mocking, saturnine pirate conducted him into a domed room, whose curved walls and roof glistened with silvery brilliance.

The floor of that room was transparent crystal. Beneath was a large circular compartment, without visible openings. Its floor was covered with a curious red substance, in oddly shaped masses. Grant shuddered as he saw those crumbling red forms. They looked weirdly like decayed statues. They were horrible travesties of human shapes.

"The space below us," the Black Hawk explained, in his chill, mocking voice, "contains a certain variety of crimson fungus. The original spores came from the jungles of the third satellite of Neptune.

"The fungi, you know, are a group of thallophytic plants, of which molds and mushrooms are members. They are devoid of the chlorophyll to which green plants owe their color. Reproduction is largely by means of asexual spores. A characteristic is the great speed with which some varieties grow.

"This particular type has a peculiar avidity for human flesh, and grows with unprecedented speed. It amuses me to watch its development upon the bodies of my less fortunate captives. But watch the results for yourself!"

A panel had suddenly slid open into the space below the crystal floor. A man, stripped to the waist, whom the captain recognized as a luckless engineer from his crew, was thrown into the strange room. The panel instantly closed.

The naked man fell on his face in a cloud of red dust. In a moment he stumbled to his feet, coughing, gasping, strangling, beating wildly at his face.

The Black Hawk touched a lever that seemed to close the circuit of a microphone. Instantly the captain heard a scream of insupportable agony from below.

The man below the crystal floor darted madly through the red dust, hammered wildly on the walls with bare fists, shrieking, moaning, pleading for aid, praying.

Suddenly his tortured body stiffened, grew rigid. Curious masses of scarlet filaments of hypha, resembling tufts of red hair, sprang from his nostrils, eyes and ears.

Crimson growth spread swiftly, until the body seemed covered with red fur.

And in a few moments it fell over, crumbling, with a crimson cloud of spores swirling about it.

"What do you think of my hobby?" The Black Hawk inquired with a taunting smile.

Captain Grant was sick with horror.

"You—you demon!" he choked.

Blind rage suddenly overcame his shuddering horror.

Clenching a fist, he swung abruptly upon the satanic pirate.

THE Black Hawk's hand came up swiftly, holding a tiny but deadly ray tube.

"You forget yourself, Captain," he said. "Remember that I promised to spare you and your wife from undergoing the little ceremony we just witnessed. Do not make me recall that promise."

The captain fell back before the menace of the weapon, suddenly weak and trembling.

"Let me out of this infernal place," he muttered.

The Black Hawk called a steward to show him to his room.

For a week Captain Grant and his wife were enforced guests of the pirate, treated with deliberate, if taunting courtesy.

The black rocket, laden with plunder, continued her restless cruise of the void.

Then, after a night of troubled sleep, the captain awoke to find Nell gone from the luxurious stateroom which they occupied.

At once, he sought the Black Hawk, who greeted him with his usual half-sneering politeness.

"Your wife is slightly unwell," his cold tone informed Captain Grant. "She has the attention of my specialists. You need fear nothing on her account.

"And you will be interested," he added, "to know that we are soon to part. In a few hours we enter the atmosphere of the planet Venus. You and your wife will be landed there today. I regret that I must lose your companionship."

"Whatever happens to me, please don't harm Nell," the Captain pleaded.

"My word is still good," the Black Hawk said coldly.

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Several hours later, somewhat to the surprise of Captain Grant, the rocket landed on firm ground. He was assisted from the port, and looked about anxiously.

The slender black hull of the rocket lay on a bare sandy beach. Above it rose a barren gray rock. A vast waste of green-grey ocean stretched away in all directions. Dense gray clouds filled the sky.

The tall form of the Black Hawk stepped out beside him. "An island on the planet Venus," he said. "It's less than a thousand miles to the city of Thalong, from which aid can reach you."

"But my wife—" the captain cried.

"Here she is."

The Black Hawk pointed to two large chests, of a white, silvery metal, which the crew were busy lowering through the port. In a moment they lay side by side on the sandy beach.

"Your wife is in one of them," the pirate said, with a demoniac smile. "She is under a mild anaesthetic which will keep her sleeping for twelve hours. The chest contains sufficient air to last that long, and no longer. It contains also a supply of food and water, and a portable radio transmitter, with which you may summon aid. The chest is not locked. You have merely to lift the lid."

"And the other chest?" The Captain's voice was anxious.

"Ah! the other chest!" The Black Hawk smiled. "The other chest! It is filled with spores of crimson fungus. If you, by any unfortunate mistake, open it, a cloud of the spores will instantly fly out and settle on your skin. You will meet the fate of the man we watched through the crystal floor."

"Which chest—" Captain Grant cried, his voice trembling.

"Ah yes, which chest!" The Black Hawk's suave tone replied. "That is for you to decide. Remember your wife will live only twelve hours, if the chest is not opened. And good-by, my friend."

Leaving Captain Grant shaken and speechless, the pirate of space sprang back through the port. Roseate flame hissed from the exhaust nozzles of the long black ship. It leapt up to vanish in the gray clouds.

The captain was left alone with the chests.

They seemed identical in every respect. The ornate pattern engraved in the silvery metal was the same on each chest. They were roughly three feet square by six in length.

The captain fell furiously to examining them. He could detect no faintest difference. He held his ear against each, in hope that some faint sound of breathing might reach him, to reveal which held his precious Nell. But he heard nothing.

He left the chests and walked anxiously up and down the beach, gazing wildly over the desert of water, staring into the gray gloom of the sky. Many times his heart leapt, as he thought he glimpsed a distant rocket plane. And always it fell again, when he found his eagerness had deceived him.

He turned again to the bright chests, lying side by side on the white sand. He ran from the one to the other listening, feeling them, even tugging a little at the lids.

His brain was a wild chaos of wonder. Suppose the Black Hawk had tricked him? Suppose the chests were empty? Suppose both contained the fatal spores? Suppose his lovely Nell were in the one and the food and radio set in the other?

Again he walked up and down beside them, thinking madly. Hours went by, and he must soon release his wife or she would be suffocated.

Impulsively, he bent to raise the lid of the nearest. His eyes caught fine letters engraved on the edge of the silvery lid.

The Other One.

The Black Hawk had cut it there. A warning. Captain Grant ran to the other chest. But with his hand on the lid, he paused, trembling, his body clammy with a cold sweat.

Might the warning be false? Had the letters been cut there to cause him to open the deadly chest? Or did the pirate intend the words to save his life?

He ran back toward the first chest, he stopped, and collapsed in a trembling heap. Cold sweat chilled him; a strange dizziness came over him, his throat was dry; he trembled.

But the time was up—he must delay no longer. He tottered to his feet, ran back to the chest without the warning, tugged at the lid. Dizzy weakness overcame him.

"A trick," he muttered.

HE TURNED and staggered to the other, and grasped the lid. The inscribed words, "The Other One" caught his eye again. He recoiled as from a deadly snake.

He ran away from the chests, stumbling across the sand, eyes wild with fear. He imagined the swift red mould growing over him, choking him, converting him into a rotting, crumbling mass.

He would not open the chest! There was a fair chance that he would be discovered by some passing air-liner before he starved to death.

Then the hideous vision of the death of the scarlet fungus was dispelled by a picture of Nell as she had been on the recent wedding day. Happy, singing, gloriously lovely, devoted to him. She was in one of the chests,

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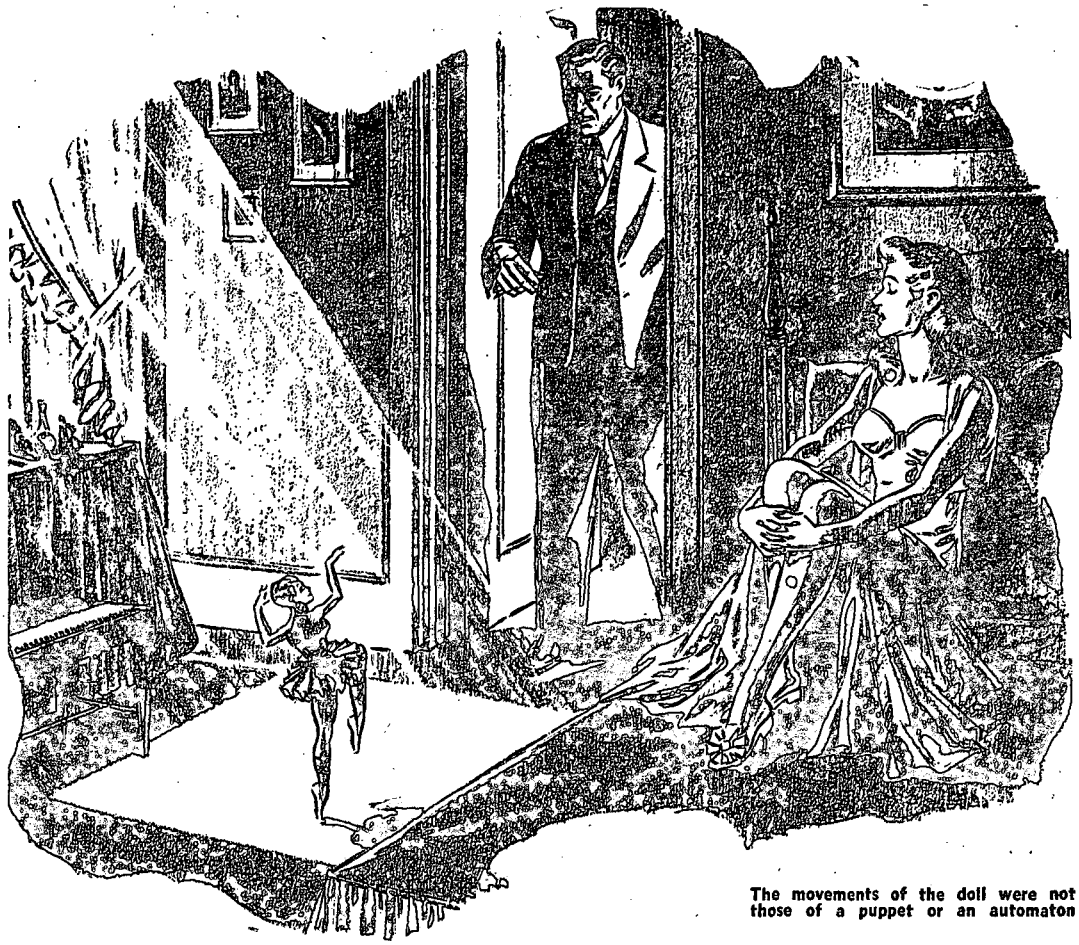

The movements of the doll were not those of a puppet or an automaton

THE DARK ANGEL

By HENRY KUTTNER

Tim Hathaway sensed that his wife was growing different—but it took him a long time to learn just why!

JUKE-BOX music roared through the smoky gin-mill. The old man I was looking for sat in a booth far back, staring at nothing, his shaking, veined hands gripping a tiny glass. I recognized him.

He was the one. He could tell me what I wanted to know. After what I had seen tonight, at the Metropolitan—

He was already drunk. His eyes were dull and glazed. As I slid into the booth beside him, I heard him mumbling something, over and over.

"The doll—Joanna, you shouldn't—Joanna—"

He was lost in the dream-world of alcoholism. He saw me, and he didn't see me. I was one of the phantoms of memory that thronged about him.

"Tell me about it," I said.

And even that, from a stranger, couldn't penetrate the mists that fogged his brain. The soul was gone from him. He reacted like a puppet to my words. Once or twice I had to put a few questions to him, but he

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answered them—and went on—coming back always to Joanna, and the doll.

I was sorry for him. He was already damned. But it was my business to find out the truth about what had happened at the Metropolitan an hour ago.

"A long time ago," he said thickly. "That's when it started. The night we had that big snowfall, when—or even before that? I don't know."

He didn't know. Later, after the change had begun to be noticeable, he tried to remember, to dredge from his memory tiny incidents that might have been significant. Yet how was he to tell with any certainty?

Gestures, words, actions that might once have seemed perfectly normal were now, in retrospect, freighted with a subtle flavor of horrible uncertainty. But on the night of the snowstorm he had first begun to wonder.

He was forty then, Joanna thirty-five. They had begun to consider settling down to a comfortable middle age, and there was no reason why they shouldn't. Tim Hathaway had risen, in twenty years, from a junior clerk in an advertising firm to general manager, with a good salary and no worries worth mentioning.

They had an apartment in Manhattan, and a bad-tempered little Pekingese named Tzu-Ling. There were no children. Both Tim and Joanna would have welcomed a couple of kids, but it just hadn't turned out that way.

A nice-looking pair, the Hathaways—Joanna with her hair still jet-black, her skin smooth and unlined, and a fresh, sparkling vigor about her—Tim a solid, quiet man with a gentle face and streaks of gray at his temples.

They were beginning to be invited to dinners with the conservative set, but every so often they'd have a quiet binge to keep the grass green.

"But not too green," Joanna said, as the big sedan tooled down the Henry Hudson Parkway with flurries of snow racing toward the windshield. "That gin wasn't so hot."

"Cigarette, please, dear," Tim said. "Thanks. Well, I don't know where Sanderson gets his liquor, but I think he must dredge it up out of the East River. My stomach's rumbling."

"Watch that—" She spoke too late. Out of the blurry storm twin headlights rushed at them.

Tim swung the wheel desperately and felt the sick twisting of gravity that meant a bad skid. In a moment the sedan jolted and stopped. Tim cursed quietly and got out.

"Our rear wheels are in the ditch," he told Joanna through the open window. "You'd better get out. Even with our lights on, a car wouldn't be able to see us till it was too late."

He contemplated the prospect of having the sedan smashed into a heap of junk, and it seemed the likeliest possibility. As Joanna's fur-coated figure joined him, he bent, gripped the rear bumper and heaved mightily. But he couldn't budge the car's enormous weight.

Grunting, he let go.

"I'll see if I can gun her out," he said. "Wait out here a minute, Jo, and yell if a car comes."

"Okay."

HE played the clutch and gunned the motor. Then, with catastrophic suddenness, he saw the reflected gleam of headlights approaching.

It was too late to avoid a crash. He jammed his foot on the accelerator, felt the rear wheels skid around without traction—and suddenly, incredibly, the car *jumped*. There was no other word for it. Someone or something had lifted the sedan and thrust it forward on to the road.

Instinctive reflex made him jockey accelerator and steering-wheel. The other car sped by, missing him by a fraction. White-faced, Tim eased the sedan to the side of the road and got out.

A dark figure loomed through the snowy gusts.

"Joanna?"

There was a pause.

"Yes, Tim."

"What happened?"

"I—don't know."

"You didn't try to lift the car!" But he knew that was impossible.

Yet Joanna hesitated.

"No," she said suddenly. "There must have been solid ground under the snow back there."

"Sure," Tim said. He got a flashlight, went back to the ditch, and made a brief examination.

"Yeah," he said unconvinced.

They were both silent on the way home. Tim had caught a glimpse of Joanna's grease-smeared gloves.

A small thing—yet it was the beginning. For Tim knew quite well that the car had been *lifted* out of the ditch, and a frail woman of Joanna's build couldn't possibly have managed it.

But their doctor, Farleigh, an endocrinologist, talked to Tim a few weeks later.

"Tell Joanna to come in and see me," he said. "She hasn't been around for quite a while."

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"She's healthy enough," Tim said.

Farleigh put his finger-tips together.

"Is she?"

"She's never sick."

"She may be. One of these days."

"There's nothing—"

"I want to keep an eye on her," Farleigh said. "I want to give her another complete check-up—x-rays and everything."

Tim took out a cigarette and lighted it very carefully.

"Okay. Let's have it. What's wrong?"

"I didn't say."

Tim looked at him. Farleigh scowled and took some x-ray plates from his drawer.

"Changes take place," he said. "The glands have a lot to do with it. I'm wondering if I haven't made a mistake."

"How?"

"If I called in a specialist. Joanna is—ah—it may be a form of hypothyroidism. Her skin, the exoderm, is thickening."

"I hadn't noticed."

"You wouldn't. Unless you tried to put a hypodermic needle through it. These x-rays—" He seemed oddly reluctant to show them to Tim.

"I gave her a gastro-intestinal series, and some iodine stains. One way to get a look at interior organs. It's peculiar. There's some sort of intestinal atrophy—the appendix has entirely disappeared, and the heart's much enlarged. Other things—"

"What?"

"Probably nothing," Farleigh said, putting the plates away again. "Just ask Joanna to run in and see me, will you?"

"Yeah," Tim said and left.

When he got home that night, the living-room was dark and empty. A low crooning noise came from the bedroom. He went quietly to the door and looked in. He couldn't see Joanna, but he saw something else, moving across the floor.

It might have been the Pekingese, except that it was even smaller than Tzu-Ling, and it *walked*, with the automatic precision of a clockwork figure.

The low crooning changed pitch. It became insistent. The tiny figure altered its movement. It attempted something grotesquely like a ballet position, an *entrechat* and an *arabesque*, which it couldn't hold. It fell with a soft thump on the carpet.

The crooning stopped.

"Tim?" Joanna said.

His middle cold and wet with sweat, Tim stepped into the bedroom and switched on the light. Joanna was sitting on the bed, her knees drawn up. For a moment he thought of how lovely she was, her dark hair tumbling in ringlets, her face bright and interested like a girl of seventeen. Then he looked down.

A few years ago, a casual friend had given Joanna a doll, an expensive one, completely articulated and quite lifelike, for all its tiny-ness. It was a foot and a half high. Now it lay crumpled at Tim's feet.

He forced himself to stoop and pick it up. The wig felt like real hair under his fingers.

"Joanna," he said, and an empty, gray helplessness gripped him as he stared at his wife. For he knew what he had seen. It was impossible, but the moonlight had been sufficiently bright. The movements of the doll had not been those of a puppet or an automaton.

AND she knew that he had seen. She drew her robe closer about her shoulders, shivering.

"Close the window, Tim, will you, please? It's cold."

He obeyed silently. By the time he faced her again, she had made her decision.

"Sit down, Tim," she said, patting the bed beside her. "Put the doll here. It won't move now. Not unless I. . . . Tim, I don't know if you'll understand. If you *can* understand. But I hope you do."

"And I—rather hope that I'm insane," he said slowly. "What is it, Joanna? *For heaven's sake!*"

"Don't. It's nothing terrible. I've felt it coming for a long while now. I'm changing—that's all."

"Changing?"

"I was afraid at first. But now I—my mind works so much better. So does my body. I can feel things—sense things—and the doll was just an experiment. I can control inanimate objects from a distance. It takes practice.

"I did it with the car, that night in the snowstorm. Didn't you notice how white I was—after? It drained so much of my energy. But I could do it now without any difficulty at all."

"Joanna," he said, "I think you're insane."

She looked away.

"It's hard to begin at the beginning," she said reflectively.

"I've come so far since—since I noticed there *was* a change. And I'm so far beyond you now, Tim. I can see into your mind, and it's full of blocks and walls that won't let truth in."

"How did you make that doll move?"

Her dark eyes watched him for a moment. Then something cold and very strange seemed to lance into his brain, a whirling maelstrom like a twisting snow-flurry.

It was gone instantly. But now Joanna's voice seemed stronger and clearer. And he could understand, curiously, without questioning, what she was saying.

And—in essence—what she said was this

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—she was becoming a completely new type of human being. *Human* didn't describe it too accurately. As man evolved, through mutation, an enormous step beyond Neanderthaler, so the new race would come, similarly through mutation.

"But not in the conventional way, Tim. Not the way fiction writers have it. There won't be babies born with heads three feet in diameter and shriveled little bodies. Nothing like that.

"The higher an animal in the evolutionary scale, the longer is the period before maturity. It's natural selection. The super-race wouldn't be safe if it revealed its superiority too soon. It's protective camouflage.

"I think I'm the first mutation of this type, Tim. And not until lately—thirty-five years after my birth—have I begun to mature. Till now, I was adolescent—*merely human.*"

There had been unsuccessful mutations in the past—freaks, abortions, failures. But more and more often now the mutations would occur.

"And we'll breed true. It may take many, many years before another super-human of my type appears. But I don't think I'll die for a long time. It's taken me thirty-five years to mature, so—"

She flung out her arms.

"And I'll change! *I'll change!* I'm seeing the world through new eyes now, the eyes of an adult! Up until now I've been like a child!"

Her eyes glowed.

"There will be more of us. I think I know how it happened in my case. You remember my father? He was connected with the Museum. Before my birth, he was out with that research expedition in Mexico, investigating the great meteoric crater there. My mother was with him.

"The radiations from that buried meteor brought about some rearrangement of genes in the germ-plasm, so the mutation was successful. And now there's so much new work in electronics. So much radiation being broadcast! I'm the only one of my kind now, but in a hundred years, or less—"

Tim looked at her. Yes, she had changed. He could see that now. She looked quite different, with an odd combination of new youthfulness and an underlying firm self-realization—a new maturity.

And there was more than that. As a child gains an intangible quality when he matures, so Joanna had gained something that was no more to be described than the blaze of a candle-flame shining through thin white porcelain.

Yet she was—Joanna. He knew, deep in his mind, how illogical her words were. But he could not disbelieve them. It was as though unseen fingers had reached out and moulded his thoughts into new patterns.

Tim reached for his wife's hand. That, at least, was familiar. The slim fingers lay warm and relaxed against his palm. He tightened his grip.

There was nothing to say, against the overpowering certainty, the deep belief, that possessed him. She had made him believe, somehow.

"Joanna," he whispered. "You mustn't."

SHE shook her head.

"You mustn't," he repeated. "So it's happened once. Once in a million years it could happen like this—perhaps. But you can change it."

"I can't," she said. "A plant can't stop growing. It can't grow down again into a seed."

"What about us?"

"I don't know." Her voice was sombre. "I don't think we can go on this way—not for long."

"You know I—"

"And I love you, too, Tim. But I'm afraid. You see, I love Tzu-Ling in a different way. He's an inferior species. Later, after I've matured farther, you might be an inferior species to me too."

"You mean I am now," he said bitterly.

"No, Tim. You're not! But don't you see—I can't help this change. I can't stop it. And eventually we'll grow farther and farther apart, until—"

"Tzu-Ling. I see."

"And that would be horrible. For both of us. It might not be for me—then. It would depend on how much I'd changed by that time. But you understand, darling, don't you? It's better to make the break now, so we'll each have the right memories."

"No," he said, "I don't see that at all. There couldn't be any change that couldn't be compensated for."

"Human logic, based on emotion. You know it isn't true."

"You mustn't leave me, Joanna."

"I won't go tonight, anyway," she said, looking away. "I'm still too human. That makes me vulnerable. I think, in the end, *our* race will conquer and rule because we won't be vulnerable through emotions. We'll have emotions, yes, but they won't rule us. Logic will be the highest law."

Tim flung the doll into a corner, where it lay crumpled grotesquely. Tzu-Ling wakened at the noise and padded in from the next room to sniff at the doll. Satisfied, he lay down, head on his fluffy golden paws, and slept again.

But Tim did not sleep well that night. For a long while he lay awake, listening to Joanna's quiet breathing beside him, watching her profile in the faint moonlight. He

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was remembering a great deal. In the end he had come to no conclusion.

He slept at last.

And in the morning Joanna was gone.

For a year there was no trace of her. Tim put a detective agency on the track without result. He told no one the truth. They would not have believed. And he felt that if they *did* believe. . . .

Sometimes he had a sickening picture of Joanna, outcast and alien, hunted like an animal by the humans who were no longer akin to her. He did hint a little to Dr. Farleigh, but the physician was so obviously skeptical that Tim didn't pursue the subject.

He waited, though, and followed the newspapers avidly. Somewhere, sometime, he felt, he would see Joanna's face looking up at him from a half-tone reproduction, or read her name in some news item.

When it came, Tim almost missed it. He had read and finished the weekly newsmagazine, cast it aside and was smoking idly, listening to the radio. Joanna's face kept materializing in his thoughts. It wasn't quite the same—there was some subtle difference.

Then he knew. He picked up the magazine, found the photograph and examined it closely. It wasn't Joanna. It didn't look like her at all.

And yet, beyond the contour of cheek and jaw, beyond the outward difference, there was something of Joanna in the picture. It was impossible that the bony structure of the skull could have changed. And it was equally impossible that Joanna could have grown younger. This woman was scarcely twenty.

Quite young, Tim thought, for her to have such a remarkable discovery in the electronic-radiation field. Unless—

He took a plane to Berkeley, California, the next morning. He did not see Marion Parkhurst—that was the girl scientist's name. She had left for a brief vacation in the Rockies—a vacation from which she didn't return.

Marion Parkhurst dropped out of sight.

FOR two years after that nothing happened. There were a few new inventions patented and put on the market, all of them connected with radiations—an ingenious improvement on the magnetron, for example, and a gadget that brought a new concept into the television field. Little things, none of them important singly, but Tim kept a scrapbook.

Five years.

Seven years.

Ten years.

He had not forgotten. He would never forget, while he lived. Tim had loved Joanna very deeply, and sometimes, in his dreams, he would be St. George, rescuing Joanna from a dragon that wore the terrible shape of the future.

Sometimes he saw that future in his dreams—a world peopled by men and women like gods, alien and inhuman as gods. They were giants and crushed humans like ants beneath their titan feet.

But giants could be killed, Tim knew. The mutation was more deadly, for it masqueraded as human. It had been ten years since Joanna's disappearance, and during that decade she had not been unmasked. She had been perfectly free to do—what?

Fifteen years.

Seventeen.

And then, one warm summer night in Central Park, he saw her again. Some fantastic radiation from her mind must have impinged on his. For she wasn't Joanna any more. She didn't look like Joanna, or walk like Joanna.

After he had stopped her, Tim had a sick feeling that he must be mistaken. But he gripped her arms and swung her about into the glare of an overhead light. She could have wrenched free. Tim was sixty-two and older than his years.

She stood there, waiting, watching him while he searched her face. He could have seen more clearly with his glasses, but he felt embarrassed about putting them on. Not that his age didn't show clearly in his face, but—

She was between twenty and twenty-five, he guessed, and she bore not the slightest resemblance to Joanna. He didn't look for anything physical, though. He searched for that burning, ardent spark, more than human, that blazed within her like incandescent flame.

It was not there.

So he had been wrong. It was another false hope, after so many others. Tim's shoulders slumped. He felt very weary and very old. He muttered something—an apology—and turned away. Then a slim hand touched his arm.

"Tim," she said.

He looked at her, incredulous. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be happening after seventeen years. This girl didn't have the—the flame.

She read his thought. She leaned toward him, and that tremendous wave of vitality, of godlike fire, pulsed out from her. Tim was shaken by its strength.

"Joanna," he said. "You can't be—"

"I learned," she said very softly. "I learned to control the Power. It was too dangerous. Men might have learned to recognize me by it."

He couldn't say anything. He fumbled for her hand, but she drew away.

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"Don't touch me, Tim," she said. "It's a mistake. I shouldn't have—but when I read your mind and saw all that lost, lonely unhappiness—I couldn't let you go without—"

"I'll never let you go now," he said.

"You've forgotten. I've changed—more than you realize now."

"It's you who've forgotten. Look." He swept out an arm, indicating the tremendous lighted towers of New York that stood like cyclopean guardians ringing the Park.

This had been their favorite view when they were first married. On such warm summer evenings as this they had walked together along the dim paths, listening to the distant music of the carousel, laughing at nothing, talking.

He dropped his hand quickly. The light had mercilessly revealed the brown-splotched skin, the blue veins of age.

"Do you think age matters?" Joanna asked. "I could make you young again, Tim. But you'd still be human. And I'm not anymore."

"You could do that?"

"Yes. My power has grown. But it's a question of different species, not of age."

"Joanna," he said, "what do you want? What are you trying to do?"

"Now?" She smiled a little crookedly. "I'm just waiting. For many years I did electronic research, trying to cause an artificial mutation that would duplicate my own.

"But I failed. I'm afraid there's nobody else like me on earth, Tim, and perhaps there never will be. I'll live for a long time—a thousand years or more—and I'll be very lonely. I'm lonely now.

"My heritage—a new race—sustained me for years, but I've waited until I know how hopeless my wait may be. I'm the first of the new race, and I may be the last."

"Give it up," he said. "You've wasted years."

"I have so many. Too many."

"Come back to me, Joanna. Forget all—"

For an instant he thought she was on the verge of yielding. But something stirred in the bushes near them. A shaggy, unkempt form loomed in the light, black against the green. Tim saw Joanna turn her head. He felt that tremendous wave of power beat out, and he was suddenly blind and giddy.

THEN he saw that the dark figure lay on the ground, motionless. His throat dry, he knelt to feel for heart-beat. There was none.

"Joanna," he said. "It was just a tramp. Drunk. You killed him?"

"He heard us. I had to. In all the world, you're the only man who knows, the only man I can trust completely."

"But he was drunk! He wouldn't have remembered. If he had, nobody would have believed him."

"I can take no chances," she said. "I'm one woman against a whole world now. Forget him. His life was worthless."

What she read on Tim's face made her catch her breath in a little sob. She moved a few steps away into the shadow.

"I'm going now, Tim. But if you want to see me, I'm singing at the Met tonight."

That was all. She was gone. Tim shuddered. The night was not cold, but his blood was thin with age. And there was that horribly silent figure at his feet.

He walked south. There was nothing he could do for the tramp now. Death had struck too suddenly, too incredibly. As it might strike anywhere, anytime—with Joanna as the Dark Angel.

He knew now that she was inhuman as an angel, perhaps as amoral. The ties that had bound her to humanity were slipping. Tim was perhaps the last of those ties. When that was cut—

There would be nothing to hold her back from fulfilling the least of her desires. She would not die for a thousand years or more. Her powers were superhuman. Had she achieved full maturity yet?

If not, the future might hold sheer horror.

Tim felt his sanity slipping. He stopped at the nearest bar and ordered whisky. He kept on drinking.

He saw a world helpless, writhing in agony, beneath the rule of a woman who was more than autocrat. Lilith. Juno. A goddess—and, perhaps, mother of a race of gods and goddesses. For that was her destiny—to be mother to the new race that would crush and eradicate humanity.

He was very drunk by eight o'clock. He went home by taxi, got a flat little automatic out of a bureau drawer, and went to the Met. He bought a ticket at an exorbitant sum from a scalper and went into the foyer, ready.

His brain felt on fire.

He recognized Joanna instantly when she appeared. She was Marguerite, and it seemed black, Satanic irony to him that she should represent the spirit of purity, resisting the lures of Faust and his evil genius. He waited.

And then Tim Hathaway was ready. A gaunt, white-haired figure stood up from an orchestra seat and leveled an automatic at Marguerite's white-gowned figure. He was seen instantly. Hands reached for him. Voices rose in excited clamor.

He couldn't miss. He squeezed the trigger. The bullet would go through her heart.

It would go through—Joanna's heart.

Yes—it was easy. The tumult, the radiations from a thousand minds beating furiously through the theatre, had confused her.

[*Turn to page 96*]

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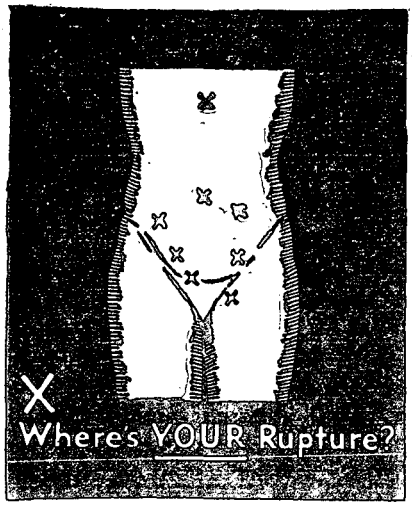
Quick help for Rupture!



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Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Wonderful Protection

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature hold the average rupture securely but gently, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry . . . results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It is GUARANTEED to bring you heavenly comfort and security or it costs NOTHING. The Air-Cushion works in its own unique way—softly, silently doing its part in providing protection. Learn what this patented invention may mean to you—send the coupon quick!

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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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She had no chance to use her inhuman power. She wasn't fully mature yet, and Tim could have killed her then.

But he didn't.

At the last moment, he jerked up the automatic. The bullet tore through painted canvas. With a hoarse, sobbing cry, Tim plunged into the heart of the mob that was thronging around him, and lost himself in that human maelstrom.

He slipped through an exit, unobserved. The mob was yelling so loudly that he didn't hear his name called, again and again, by the white-gowned Marguerite on the stage.

"Tim! Come back! You were right, darling! *Tim, come back to me!*"

Tim Hathaway put his whiskey glass on the table. His bleared eyes stared into mine. He was less drunk than he had been when he began his story.

"She did that?" he whispered. "After I—"

"Yes," I said.

"You were there?"

"I was there."

The juke-box's honky-tonk music blared out again. The grotesque shadows of dancing couples moved jerkily on the wall.

Hathaway stood up.

"Thanks," he said, moistening his lips. "Thanks for coming after me . . . telling me. . . ."

"I had a reason," I said. "Where are you going?"

"Back to her," he said. "Back to my wife."

The booth was secluded. No one could see us. I stood up too—and looked at Hathaway. I used the Power.

He died instantly, without pain. It was merciful.

I waited till his body had slumped down out of sight. I was grateful to him. Therefore—I killed him.

But he had given me the answer for which I had been searching for many years. Even an inferior race can be useful. I put Hathaway out of my mind and went toward the door. I was going to Joanna, the future mother of my children, of the new race that would rule the earth.

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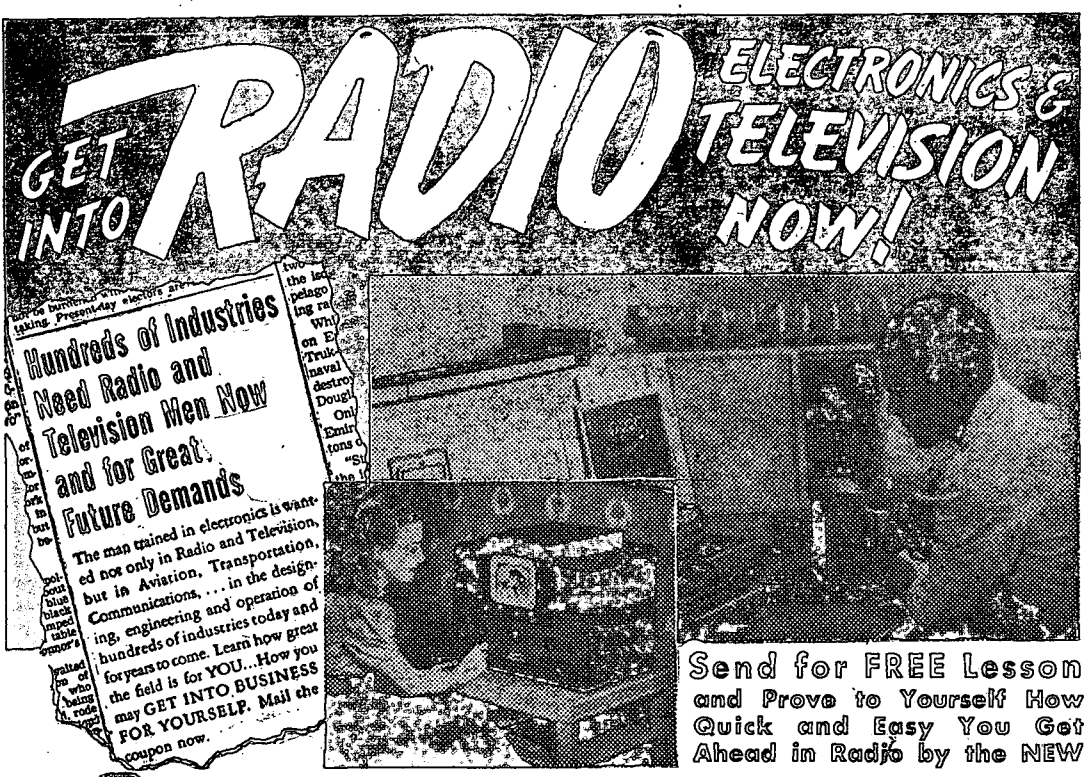

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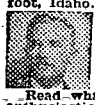

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 10)

back, where it can't be seen. (The ad looks better than the cover.) You *should* do *something*. If you will remember, both Capt. Future *and Joan* are supposed to wear space suits, not just the Capt. Do you notice how well Bergey camouflaged his name? I could hardly find it. I guess he didn't like it either (I mean the cover, of course).

The inside pics were average at best. Did you notice the resemblance between Bork on page 17 and the natives on page 13? Two (or is it two?) artists (?) with one-tracked minds (?).

And now for the stories.

1. OUTLAW WORLD on page 54, quote, "She struggled, had felt a blow on her helmet, then all had been darkness." How could a blow on her helmet knock Joan unconscious, unless it went *through* the helmet? I think they would make them stronger than that.

2. THE FORGOTTEN MAN OF SPACE. At last, a Hall of Fame Classic that *is* one. A very close second.

3. THE JIMSON GIANT.

The features were good as usual. David Olsen had an excellent idea about AFTERMATH, which completes the process of putting it in the ashcan, where it belongs. AFTERMATH was the *real* cause of the stench.

What with the war over, maybe the paper shortage will ease up so that you can print 4 shorts as you used to instead of 2. Oh yes, in DAYS OF CREATION in the last issue of CF, CF and Co. helped create the planet Futuria. It's never been mentioned since. How about a story about same? I know it was by Sterling, but what's the difference?

Ahem. Like many other crackpot fen, I HAVE WRITTEN A STORY. Ray, yippee, yahoo, bravo, brrraack. (Hey, how'd *that* get in here?) It is on the plan (not plane) of children's radio serials, such as the —— ——. (In the first dash, put any color you want, in the second, put almost anything that you can think of.) *Sarge, put down that blue pencil.* Here goes. We're off. (And I'm not kidding.)

Faster than a speeding turtle.

More powerful than a half-dead centipede.

ABLE TO LEAP FLAT MOLE HILLS WITH A SINGLE POGO-STICK.

Look. Under the table.

It's a *grumphlunk*.

It's a *norfischnikorn*.

It's, THE BLUUUE BEM (Police whistle, motorcycle, machine gun, scream, atom bomb sounds).

Yes, kiddies, it's that fearless, brave, courageous defender of interplanetary justice, THE BLUUUE BEM (Police whistle, motorcycle, machine gun, scream, atom bomb sounds).

But first. Kiddies, have you had your Krispy, Krunchy Krackly Korn Krackers yet? Hmmmmm? Remember, they are rich in *mumphlushx, kronchskloff*, and *slouph*. They are loouuusseeyy with the stuff.

And now, THE BLUUUE BEM. (Police whistle, motorcycle, machine gun, scream, atom bomb sounds). As you know, THE BLUUUE BEM (Police whistle, motorcycle, machine gun, scream, atom bomb sounds) is in ordinary life, Joseefius Q. Kennedy. (No offense, Joe) He receives his strange power by drinking the magic liquid, *Xeno*, which he received in the wilds of Tibet from that greatest of all the Lamas, *Sahr-jhent Sat-urn*.

When we last left him, he had just met Joe Jerk, the GYP. They looked at each other. THE BLUUUE BEM (If you don't know it by this time, you might as well throw this away if you haven't done it already) speaks, "You rat."

What will happen next? Tune in tomorrow for the further adventures of THE BLUUUE BEM (Poli—aaah *nuts*), brought to you by Krisky Krunchy Krackly Korn Krackers which, spelt backwards is srekcarK nroK ylkcarK yhcnurK ypsirK. *No other kracker can make that statement.*

The ushers will pass up and down the aisles collecting roses, orchids, etc. But please, *no stinkweed.*

Well Sarge, how is it? Oh. Well you *don't* have to be so *definite*.

I'm getting sick of this letter by now (aren't *you*?) so I'll sign off, but first, (here we go again) Sarge, you ought to put brakes on that blue pencil of yours. I could hardly recognize my last letter.—*215 McClellan Street, Bronx 56, New York.*

For that lack of recognition, Irv, you should

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be truly grateful. But since it hurt, ye Sahrjh can only say he is sahry. Better luck next time around—and get that next keg of Xeno debunged, Snaggie, but quick.

LAKE ERIE CHEERY
By Mrs. R. O. Colland

Dear Sarge: Allow me to congratulate you on the story THE FORGOTTEN MAN OF SPACE, by P. Schuyler Miller, in the Winter Issue of STARTLING STORIES. This story has one characteristic which they might well all share—besides taking the reader on a thrilling mental adventure which hints what the scientific world of the future may be for mankind, as all your stories do so well, it shows clearly the wonderful reward for kindness which meant so much to the forgotten man in saving the kindly little rabbit-folk from cruel extermination. And it showed clearly what selfishness does to a person as it brought the destruction of his "rescuers" from Earth. Why not bring this out with equal emphasis through all of your stories along with the scientific viewpoint?—*1637 Lakefront, East Cleveland 12, Ohio.*

Thanks for the kind words, Astrogatrix Colland, but you wouldn't want to make a missionary mag out of us, would you? Besides, our writers (and they are a difficult enough tribe as is) might object, and then where would we be? All right, Wart-ears, but you don't have to be so brutally direct about it, do you? Even the Sarge has feelings, incredible as it may sound.

BROOKLYN BAZOO
By Howard Gabriel

Dear Sarge: Hooray for Captain Future! Brickbats to those that don't like him. Yes sir; old "World Saver" does it again with one of the finest novels Startling Stories has put out in a long time.

The pics for the novel, tho an improvement over the last ish were almost as sickening as that inferior Xeno stuff you rave about. Now for a good drink try some Venusian Snake Juice.

The shorts—

"The Forgotten Man Of Space" Fooey! Double fooey for the pic.

"The Jimson Island Giant" Take it away! ! The illustration too.

"The Futuremen" Very good! "Worlds Of Tomorrow" Excellent.

"The Ether Vibrates" Good as always. How do you like the pic Rehn drew? You should see the stuff he sends me.

Now we come to the cover. Heh, heh. As usual we see the half-dressed gal zooming through space dressed in the traditional boots, panties and bra. She has no oxygen tanks, but that does not matter. She must be a MOON PUP in disguise. Dear old Joan needs no space suits either. She is in for an explosion any second now. Well it just goes to show. Bergey can do anything. No BEM or BTM for three ishs in a row. What's the matter, Bergey old boy? Take art lessons or somethin'?

When will S.S. go back to its old size? Soon, I hope. Well, S.S. started off 1946 with a bang! Here's lots of luck.—*1050 East 19 Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.*

Goodness, Froggy, that was a zephyrish bazoo,

[*Turn page*]

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was it not? An unexpected pleasure indeed. As to the reversion to pre-war type, Kiwi Gabriel, that will come as soon as the paper does. We are already, as stated above, back on a six-times a year basis instead of quarterly—as is our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES. More work for the Sarge—alas and lackaday. If any of you fans wish to organize a Get-more-Xeno-for-the-Sarge Club, drop Snaggletooth a line and he will be glad to arrange salary withholding deductions—and if that sounds redundant, you should see the bites he can take out of anyone's pay check. Brutal fails to describe it.

THE LIEUTENANT PULLS RANK ON THE SARGE

By Lieutenant Stanley Rundell

Dear Sarge: Most probably I am out of line, but can't something be done about these Capt. Future stories? The rest of your magazine is fine, and makes enjoyable reading, but this combination of Buck Rogers, Capt. Midnight, and Doc Savage, is a little hard to take.

If Mr. Hamilton would drag his head out long enough to apply at least a high school knowledge of the physical sciences to his stories, the results would be worth reading (And printing).—*Love Field, Dallas, Texas.*

And is not that a sweet *billet doux* to receive from Love Field? Egad and great snakes, Wart-ears, ye Sarge is stuck for an answer. The fans had better get the Xeno club started. When the old space canine runs out of words, atom bombs fade by comparison. Maybe one of you fans will take on the lieutenant. As a mere sergeant, Saturn is out of luck.

THE ETERNAL WHAT

By Mrs. Patsy Martin

Dear Sarge: I have just finished reading THE ETHER VIBRATES in your fall issue of STARTLING STORIES. I now have a problem and considering your vast portion of knowledge, or something, I decided you are the only person who can help me.

I would like to know what in thunder the whole thing is! I read and reread the letters from other readers and as far as I could figure it out, it adds up to zero. Their talk or writing is strange, your comments even stranger. I can't make heads or tails out of any of it.

What is Xeno? Who is this Dyctawo, Durham? And who are the two Joe Kennedys I am an eighteen-year-old married woman and I guess I should have stayed in school instead of getting married. Seems that I don't know much about anything. Especially STARTLING STORIES, etc.

How about letting me in on things and doing a little explaining to one of the dumber people in life (meaning—me!)? When is your next issue of STARTLING STORIES going to be on sale? What is a female BEM? Who is Bergey? Also Wart-ears and Frogeyes? Hope you can straighten me out and let me in on the details. —*3029 Foothill Boulevard, Oakland 1, California.*

Xeno won't answer this one, Snaggletooth—and don't sulk just because Patsy didn't ask what you were too? She may call herself dumb, but she isn't dumb enough for that. Well, line up the questions and we'll do the best we can.

And to what stf talk is all about, you might get in touch with one of the Los Angeles group—addresses given in the fanzine review section of this magazine. They seem to work harder at it than anyone else. But rest assured you are no more startled or mystified than was ye Sarge when first he ran afoul of this strange jargon of double-jointed double talk. Better yet, drop a

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line to Forrest J. Ackerman at 627½ South Bixel Street, Los Angeles, enclosing 50c and get a copy of his FANCYCLOPEDIA. It covers most of your distressing items.

As to Xeno, it is an elixir on which the Sarge stays permanently tanked, being the noble moral influence that he is. Since it is more than 400 proof, not even alcohol can stand it and stay sober. Your use of Dyetawo and Durham in such close juxtaposition has the Sarge stumped. But dyctawo, of English origin, I believe, is simply the initials of "don't you know there's a war on?" And since the war is over. . . .

Durham is the town in New Hampshire from which fan magazine publisher Benson Perry stems: As to the two Joe Kennedys, they seem to have dropped the Sarge from their mailing list. Probably too busy cooking up gag letters for each other.

BEM represents the initials of Bug-eyed Monster, usually to be found on the cover of ye Good Shippe STARTLING STORIES—you know the hideous beast I am speaking of. Those two-headed things that delight in menacing the heroines. Earle J. Bergey is the very sleek mustachioed gentlemen who draws them. As to Wart-ears and Frogeyes, you can name your own. At that, you'll know more about the little excresences than the Sarge does.

Make us a promise, though, will you, Patsy? Don't go back to school. You can accomplish much more in life by giving your husband ptomaine and puzzling over copies of this magazine. It will be better for our circulation too. Write us again if you get stumped.

BREATHING SPELL
By David Thomas

Dear Sarge: I've been reading your mags for a couple of years now. I've always been meaning to write in, but never quite got around to it until I read Edmond Hamilton's OUTLAW WORLD.

Back in the old days of CF I used to follow Hamilton's Curt Newton through more interplanetary horse operas than you could cram into the Sargasso Sea of Space. When Sterling took over, I gradually dropped away. Nothing against his stories, but they never seemed to get the "Hamilton touch." Now Ed is back again and his first Cap Future yarn is a humdinger.

There may be a lot of disagreement with this, but the only CF sagas better than this one were SEVEN SPACE STONES and STAR TRAIL TO GLORY. PLANETS IN PERIL was just about as good.

As for the rest of the stories, FORGOTTEN MAN OF SPACE was pretty good, though a little sketchy about the details of Cramer's life among the Maee. And THE JIMSON ISLAND GIANT wasn't anything in particular.

Unlike a lot of your correspondents, I haven't any beef to make. Both the mags are good entertainment, and looking through my scanty collection gives me a lot of pleasure always. There are a few authors, such as Leinster, Rocklynne, Brackett, Kuttner and, of course, Hamilton whom I'd like to see featured more often, but that's no criticism.

As to the Hall of Fame recommendations, let's have some of the classics by Clark Ashton Smith, Don Wandrei and the like. I think it's a great idea, and with a little pepping up in the choice of selections could easily become the strongest department of any STF mag running.

Congratulations again on the CF tale. Let's have more in the future.—*31 Linnaean Street, Cambridge 38, Massachusetts.*

Ye Sarge is overwhelmed by your praise. Davy, my lad. Returning good with unmitigated evil, we would like to have more stories by Leinster, Kuttner, Brackett, Rocklynne et cetera ourselves. And as fast as they'll write 'em, we'll

[*Turn page*]

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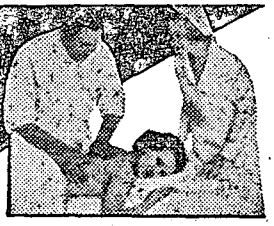

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buy 'em. Leinster is at present preparing a major opus for SS on the atomic age which should rate a twenty-two gun salute. Rocklynne, Kuttner and Hamilton will be appearing soon in these pages and those of TWS. But la Brackett seems to have been waylaid by the movie studios. Wish they'd let her option drop so we could get more work out of her.

It is a pleasure to be able to offer you Clark Ashton Smith in the Hall of Fame in our next issue, as already stated here. THE DIMENSION OF CHANCE is, I believe, one of the very best stf yarns ever printed and is, even years after its first printing, even timelier than the day after tomorrow. And again, get a load of Stevens' illustration. He's the first big-time newcomer to stf illustration in too many a long year.

TENNESSEE TANTRUM

By Lionel Inman

Dear Sergeant Saturn: My familiar, Oscar the Cockroach, sat very thoughtfully upon my shoulder, peering down to my typewriter. He punched me with one of his feelers.

"You know, Inman, I've been wronged," he said remorsefully. "I was brutally parodied in that book, 'Archie and Mehitabel'."

I looked up in irritation. "So what. Save it for another time. I'm busy. I've got to write a letter of comments on the winter STARTLING."

"You haven't any respect at all for a guy's feelings," he said disgustedly. "STARTLING is terrible, anyway. There hasn't been decent issue since 'The Giant Atom'."

"But this issue is somewhat out of the old rut," I retorted. "Look at the cover illustration for 'Outlaw World.' Notice how clearly Joan and Future stand out against the spaceship background."

Oscar looked interestedly at the cover. "Well, whaddya know, Cap'n Future's back. I thought we'd lost one of the best functioning heroes in science fiction. And look at that costume Joan is wearing, will you!"

He gave a rude whistle of appreciation.

"Yeah, but you ought to read the novel," I replied, warming to the subject. "This is none of the Brett Sterling imitations. Hamilton is back! No one can handle a hero like him."

I could see that Oscar was interested now. "But are Otho and Grag still feuding?" he asked anxiously.

"A little, but not enough to satisfy me. Only one or two little arguments."

"Well, what about the scientific errors?" he snickered. "You're always trying to pick them out." I sometimes think Oscar has too little respect for my scientific knowledge.

"I discovered one this time," I answered, seeking to gain his approval, goodness knows why. "On page 45 when Joan and Curt jumped off the side of the ship, Hamilton states that the ship left their part of space in an instant. He failed to realize that they were traveling at the same speed as the ship, so they were relatively motionless in regard to ship. I think Future would have a little trouble landing on an asteroid, too, for, even though he had slowed down for the belt, he would be traveling pretty fast in relation to an asteroid."

I looked on my shoulder and saw that Oscar had lapsed into his gloomy thoughts. "I'll sue them, that's what!" he said. "The idea of saying I write on a typer by bumping my head on the keys, when we know all I have to do is take over your mind when I want to write. Besides, I wouldn't make so many mistakes if I bumped my head on the keys."

I ignored his insult and turned my attention back to STARTLING. "The reprint, 'The Forgotten Man of Space,' is pretty good this time," I said hopefully. "Familiar story of a man marooned on a planet and becomes so attached to the place he won't leave."

"Will you put that magazine away!" bellowed Oscar. "I'll read it tomorrow. I've got to get some sleep tonight."

And Oscar, the only cockroach in fandom, may not have such a bad idea at that.—*Ripley, Tennessee.*

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All right, Lionel, we can take it, even if we find it a trifle difficult to differentiate between yourself and Oscar, over whose plagiaristic mouthings the late Don Marquis must be spinning in his grave like a gyroscope. And you can thank us for correcting your spelling of "feuding" in editing your letter. Coming from Tennessee, it seemed a little remarkable with the u and the e transposed. Xeno, Snaggletooth, or we'll start a little feud of our own with one Snaggletooth on the receiving end.

EAGER BEAVER
By Robert Davidson

Dear Sarge: I was hoping that the latest SS would live up to my great expectations and it did. The Captain Future novel OUTLAW WORLD by Ed Hamilton, your most consistently good author, really was a honey of a tale. May his pen never run dry.

There are 19 Captain Future novels to date. Fourteen by Hamilton, five by Sterling. Sterling wrote two good ones, THE STAR OF DREAD and RED SUN OF DANGER, Hamilton wrote fourteen good yarns, everyone registering a hit with me.

When it comes to writing book-length stf novels with plenty of adventure, Hamilton, Binder and Wellman are the guys who keep me coming back for more, although I wouldn't mind if you tossed in a dash of Williamson and Kuttner.

THE FORGOTTEN MAN OF SPACE also helped to make this a swell issue. The character of Cramer wasn't so impressive, but the Maee really made this story live. THE JIMSON ISLAND GIANT was quite a letdown beeause of its apparent ending. I've read much better stories by Sam Merwin, Jr.

The cover was neither good nor too bad, but there was one big mistake. That was the absence of a space-suit on Joan Randall. In space there is an absolute vacuum. The air pressure inside her body, pressing outward, would cause her to explode. Also, what's going to happen when she takes off her oxygen helmet. No, don't get me wrong. I don't mind artist Bergey *undressing* Joan like that. Captain Future looks like an eager beaver.

The illustrations for the novel weren't bad. I never disliked Orban's work. Marchioni's drawing this issue deserves to be torn up rather than burned. The FUTUREMEN and THE WORLDS OF TOMORROW as always are excellent. THE ETHER VIBRATES wasn't too good this trip with the absence of Chad Oliver, Joe Kennedy and Robert Davidson.—*1470 East 19 Street, Brooklyn 30, New York.*

So you'd put a space-suit on our Joan and hide all those luscious curves? Over ye Sarge's pickled corpus you will! Get that Xeno, Froggy!

WHAT IS PASCAGOULA?
By Ray Corley

Dear Sarge: AGGGGGH. . . ! The foregoing is what any normal Fen says when he sees the cover for the winter ish of SS. There are many things wrong with it but the two most overpowering ones are: (1) In the story, Ru Ghur's cruisers didn't fire on the asteroids until Joan was already aboard his flag-ship. (2) What in the name of Vulcan is Joan doing out in space with so few clothes on? She'd freeze in a second. So much for the cover.

OUTLAW WORLD—perfect. Score another point for Hamilton. The illustrations are of a type which have not graced the pages of SS for many a moon. I recognize (from a name in the righthand corner) that the artist is my old friend Paul Orban.

THE FORGOTTEN MAN OF SPACE—all right, but you had better give Marchioni art lessons, or send him back to the zoo whence he came.

THE JIMSON ISLAND GIANT—putrid. Again Marchioni gets the evil eye. Onward to more pleasant things.

AHHHHH—THE ETHER VIBRATES—where is Joe Kennedy? Also Chad Oliver? I hope The final day of judgment has not caught up with my two friends. (?) So G. Dallas likes 40-page novels, eh? Wonder what he thinks of OUTLAW WORLD.

[*Turn page*]

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Am looking forward to VALLEY OF THE FLAME; might be good, but remember—

This Being from the planet Pelley,
Bids to you a short "good day";
But if V. of F. to me seems smelly,
Another letter'll come your way.—
603 14th St., Pascagoula, Miss.

Strange worlds ye Sarge hast oft invaded
In search of Xeno juice or moola,
But none so weird has ever paraded
In the guise of Pascagoula!

Okay, Ray, level off and tell what it is, anyway, will you? It sounds like a first cousin to *bouillabaise*, with or without the fish-heads.

THE STATISTIC GREMLINS ARE STILL WITH US

By Harold W. Cheney Jr.

Dear Sarge: I have before me the four issues of STARTLING STORIES for the year 1945. Now with a nod from the operating room we will dissect these aforementioned issues.

As for covers (though I know no one will agree) the winter number takes all the prizes easily. Second is the space-ship cover on the summer ish. Thirdly comes the spring offering, it may have a BEM but look at the babe. Lastly—very, very last is the fall cover which I will discuss later.

Now too the stories. They will be rated in the new, but uncopyrighted Cheney method as follows. For each story there are three (3) different headings: No. 1 PLOT, this heading explains itself. No. 2 WRITING, this refers to the author's handling of his subject, also to description and English in the story. No. 3 the CHARACTERIZATION, the humanness of its characters, and their talk and action. Under each three headings each story is rated: poor, fair, good, and exceptional—to be designated by the numbers: 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

	1.	2.	3.
NOVELS:			
Red Sun of Danger— B. Sterling	/	2	/ 2 /
The Hollow World— F. B. Long	/	1	/ 2 / 1 /
Aftermath—J. R. Fearn	/	2	/ 2 / 1 /
Outlaw World— E. Hamilton	/	2	/ 3 / 3 /
SHORTS:	1.	2.	3.
Are You There Charlie—F. Smith	/	2	/ 2 / 1 /
Death By Proxy—M. Jameson	/	2	/ 2 / 1 /
The Island of Unreason— E. Hamilton	/	3	/ 2 / 1 /
The Red Dimension—E. E. Repp	/	1	/ 3 / 1 /
Fatal Thoughts—L. Noethern	/	2	/ 2 / 1 /
Incident on Calypso—M. Leinster	/	4	/ 3 / 3 / 5 /
The Superman of Dr. Jukes— F. Flagg	/	3	/ 3 / 4 /
Trouble on Triton—E. Hamilton	/	3	/ 3 / 3 /
The Forgotten Man of Space— P. S. Miller	/	3	/ 2 / 3 /
The Jimson Island Giant— S. Merwin Jr.	/	1	/ 1 / 1 /

Mayhap you think that I am too harsh on the stories? That is why there is no rating, "average," for all averages are contemporary, i.e., a story "average" today would have been awful 15 years ago.

Compared to last year's stories, and the novels in particular, this was a poor year. But in the cover dept. there has been a 100% improvement. It's not the abolition of the girl and the men we want, just the bems. For instance the Winter cover is good because you have the two humans in the foreground and the space-ship in the background against a BLACK backdrop. Perfect. The humans are better painted too, the colors blend together better then in the figures in the Fall cover. The female has a natural beauty that the creature on the Fall cover lacks. This is a common fault for Bergey.

I had hoped to be able to rate the interior pics for the year but to tell the truth there isn't one good one in all four ishs. Why don't you get some *good* artists? Or do you use them up in TWS then when they're all fagged out you have them illustrate SS?

The ETHER VIBRATES continues on its merry way in spite of ye Sarge's inane comments. I'm being polite when I say that you comment. The rest of your features, save for the review of the fanzines, are so much waste space.—*584 East Monroe Street, Little Falls, New York.*

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Ye Sarge has nothing to say. He has donned his mittens and ear muffs against the blast and is wearing Snaggletooth around his neck for a muffler. Need he say more, Mr. Cheney?

STORM FROM STORM LAKE
By D. Charles

Dear Sarge: Away out somewhere in the great cosmos (nay, even further, perhaps) a vague entity stirred feebly. And as this giant intellect shook off a deadening lethargy, its barely awakened consciousness sent out telepathic vibrations. Throughout the whole universe traveled these thoughts—echoing from planets, reverberating from comets, and slicing through suns—until they reached the green planet Earth. There they caused untold panic.

From pole to pole rose the cry, "Great Ghu has awakened!" followed by a shudder of mortal terror. Then came, "What shall we do?" and, as the only answer came, arose the cry, "Is *it* in yet?" "Yes!" answered a tiny voice, and some intrepid soul fearlessly bought a copy of the latest STARTLING. They placed it in a rocket with mutters, "Is it too late?" and released it in the general direction of nowhere.

Out and out it sped—cannoning off stars, slamming into comets, bashing asteroids—till a great formless tentacle slithered out, grasped it and drew it back into a hidden fold of space. A pause, then a sigh of infinite pleasure, that rocked the Empire State Building on its very foundations.

Again rose a hysterical, but happy cry, "Great Ghu is appeased! (appease at a time). Peace for another three months!" . . . and the moral of this little classic is my friend, that you can always depend on STARTLING to put you to sleep. But that, I fear, is neither here nor there.

I write to comment on three things, namely the cover, the stories, and THE ETHER VIBRATES. First, naturally, the cover.

I shall phrase my remarks on this subject as a true scientist would, analyzing the future from it.

"It is obvious that the female of the species is by far the hardier. The male finds it necessary to protect himself from the terrors of space by heavy, red flannel underwear, while the tough outer skin of the female suffices to protect her from the heat, cold, lack of pressure, or other dangers there may be.

No less astonishing is the equally obvious fact that the male has degenerated to insignificance in general importance through the centuries. This is shown by the fact that he is merely secondary in this type picture. Our interest naturally centers on the female. Naturally. In other words, papa stays home to do the dishes while mama is out with a sick friend . . . or as we say in the Old Country, "BOLONEY!"

Everybody asks for better covers, but ye Sarge steadfastly defends the "three g's" (gal, guy, goon). And so I must say to you, as fabled Jupiter once said to equally mythical Saturn, *"WHAT MAKES YOUR BIG HEAD SO HARD?"* When the good Lord gave you brains, Sarge, he packed sand in your left ear till it gently dribbled out your right. Two corks finished the job.

Comes the stories. "The Forgotten Man of Space" was good. Lots of nice descriptions of scenes, feelings, and moods in the caves. *More.* The novel was interesting—not sloppy, not gooey, not perfect. A couple technical errors—like: lead stops radium radiation, so how could the radium compass detect it in lead boxes?—but nothing too bad. The other attempt was short, which is all I can say for it.

THE ETHER VIBRATES hits a new low when you let tripe like that letter by Olson by. It is so silly. The crop must be mighty bad if the pick of it is that worm eaten corn. By printing that one you only encourage him to write some more—and hope that one gets printed. Oh, undoubtedly. Oh my, yes. Best letter by Rhem.

No matter what people say, Sarge, I think you're funny. In fact, I think you're a *good* writer; I think you ought to try some serious work. I suggest you try your hand at writing labels for canned goods. Then your corn could get to the people unpolluted by stuff like that in THE ETHER VIBRATES. Get it, Sarge, get it?

Keep it up, I think it's great.

[*Turn page*]

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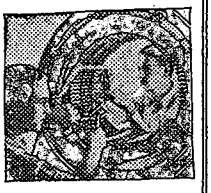

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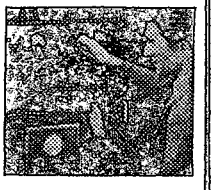

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ANOTHER LIEUTENANT PULLS RANK ON YE SARGE

By Lieut. Joseph D. M. Williamson, USAAF

Dear Sarge: "Outlaw World" from your Winter Issue of *Startling Stories* is a rather entertaining novel. The author, Hamilton, does a good job of making his story earn the scienti half of SCIENTIFICTION. That is certainly the basic requirement of a good science-fiction yarn.

Supposedly the object of science-fiction magazines is, I understand, to provide entertainment and to stimulate the imagination. Any story needs a little "blood and thunder" action to carry along the entertainment. Otherwise any reader, upon a little thought, would wonder why the super-scientist hero could not figure out some less hazardous and more efficient method of overcoming the obstacles in his path than by the custom-tested fist and fire of hand-to-hand combat.

Also I have heard, and believe it to be true, that among the ranks of the scientifiction magazines are a greater percentage of scientists and technicians than can be produced from the readers of any other type of pulp publication. The imagination of such a group of readers would, it seems, explain their preference for such dressed up (with science) old tales as hero and villain fighting it out with the gal waiting breathlessly for the inevitable outcome.

While such old plots are good entertainment, and acceptable to a degree as imagination stimulant, I still believe that the present yarns as a whole are less satisfying than those of a few years previous. Are we running out of imagination? Are many of our talented producers in the service?

Were there more amateurs in the field a few years ago producing only when pressed by inspiration and not when forced by the prospect of pounding out a living? Or just what is the matter? With very few exceptions almost every tale I've run across lately seems to leave me with the impression that "seems I've read that one somewhere before." Don't you agree that there is plenty of room for new talent in the field?

My roaming may be boring you, though. What I started out to say is that I wonder how many technicians with a little physics back of them approve of Joan dashing around with Curt on your cover in the void of space with her comely shape protected somewhat inadequately. Pleasing to the eye, but I hardly see how she survived or why Curt is privileged to wear a protective suit while his gal is exposed to the unknown hazards of space. Where is Earle Bergey's chivalry treating a poor little girl that way?—*1456 AAF BU, Boeing Fld., Seattle 8, Washington.*

New plots, he wants, pee-lots. Didn't this Terrean shavetail ever hear of the thirty-six—count 'em, 36—possible dramatic situations? You can't satisfy them, Frogeyes. Next they'll be demanding literature or something worse!

GRIMES' CRIMES

By Millard Grimes

Dear Sarge: It seems a new generation of letter hacks has risen to take the place of the late one which was composed of such great AUTHORS as Kennedy, Oliver, Waible, Perry, and a dozen others I could name. Maybe they aren't gone for keeps. At least we can hope so. As for this new generation. . . .

They seemed to be handicapped by the lack of space given to your letter section. It takes many letters to make one interesting. For example, one letter may mention some story in the previous issue and the rest (if there are only a few) may not even mention it. What good is one person's opinion of a story?

However, the newcomers who do get their letters published, look pretty good. I guess I'm the one to talk about newcomers, when this will be the first letter

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of mine ever published in SS (if). But I took my baby steps in some of the other more lenient mags, just as the old generation was fading.

So much for that.

The war is over, or have you heard? So when is STARTLING STORIES going bi-monthly? Will it be soon, please? Since it would do no good if I did, I'll not ask for trimmed edges.

Next on our list is the subject of covers, and a juicy one it is. This cover on the winter ish would have been okay if you had eliminated the girl, made the man and the ship in the background larger. MORE COVERS LIKE THE SUMMER ONE. That's my cry.

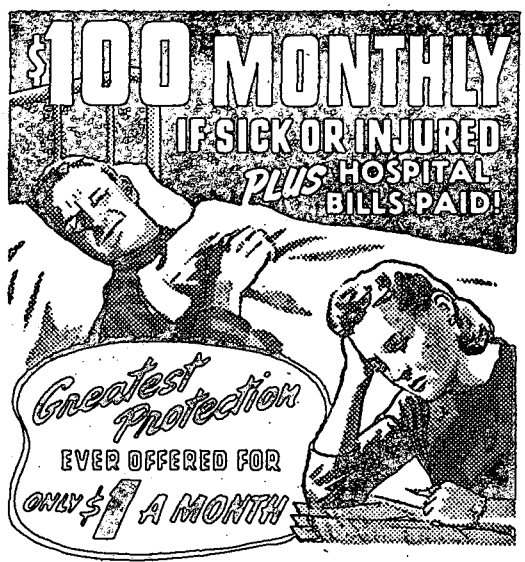
Sorry, but I was pretty disappointed in Hamilton's novel. Maybe I was expecting too much. Wish I had room to talk about it more.—*307 10th Street, Columbus, Georgia.*

Okay, you go right on crying your eyes out, Kiwi Grimes. The Sarge doesn't care. He is as curious as you to know what happened to so many of the old reliables. Kennedy hasn't been heard from in months—nor have Waible and Perry. Oliver did submit a letter, which would have made the last TEV had it arrived in time. It didn't.

For a final and parting shot through our stern rocket jets, STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES are both bi-monthly as of now. So get those letters in on time, astrogators. Ye Sarge and his merry men (?—!) will be looking for them on the next sweep around this corner of the System. So long, fans.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of Startling Stories, published quarterly at Chicago, Ill., for October 1, 1945. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Startling Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, None; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1945. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1946.



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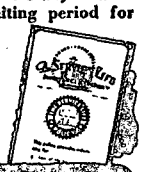

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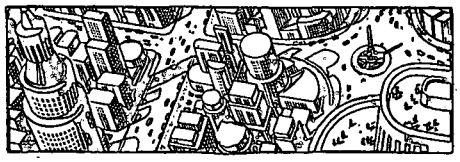
REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

By

SERGEANT SATURN

THERE are three items that rate special attention from the Sarge in the fanzine pile this month. First is the second issue of ROCKETS, published quarterly by R. L. Farnsworth at 469 Duane Street, Glen Ellyn, Illinois. It was the quasi-literate first edition of this mag which the Sarge blasted unmercifully an issue or two ago.

Ye Sarge is not really against the idea of



space travel, but he can get all riled up over a sloppy job of writing, editing or printing, and the first ROCKETS was sour indeed on all three counts. Somehow, Kiwi Farnsworth has given himself a hoist by the bootstraps and emerged with an excellent second edition, full of plans of rockets and information pertinent to rocketeering. For those interested, the mag costs four dollars a year or three years for ten dollars.

There is but one howler in the book. That comes from Douglas Freese of Portage Des Sioux, Missouri, and states authoritatively that the juice of orange peel is "highly explosive and has a flash about five times as powerful as the juice from the pulp." Any bartender could have told him the juice of orange peel is almost pure alcohol, so naturally, it burns easily. However, we'll continue to swing around the System on Xeno.

Second on the agenda is the FANEWS-CARD SECOND ANNUAL, which Walter Dunkelberger has put out and dedicated to the late Earl Kay. It is a handsome piece of work with distinguished art offerings by Budd and Hannes Bok. Congratulations, Dunk. Fans who want a look at it can write to the FANEWS address, which will be listed in its proper place on the list to come.

Third of the month's events is a beautifully bound and printed booklet of fanzine contributions compiled and written by Gerry de la Ree of 9 Bogert Place, Westwood, New Jersey. If slightly pretentious in spots, they still make an attractive fanpackage. Those

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fans who obtain copies will be rolling in luck.

As for the A-list, nine other offerings are listed this trip, which is a slightly better showing than last time we conned the field. But the B-list is undistinguished and sparse, save for the omniverous FANEWS and Taurasi's FANTASY TIMES. The A's first.

ACOLYTE, 1005 West 35th Place, Los Angeles 7, California. Co-editors, F. T. Laney & S. D. Russell. Published quarterly, 15c per copy.

Still up there at the top of the heap in quality as well as alphabetically. Current issue has gruesome Alva Rogers cover and is featured by a brilliant analysis of fantastic fiction by Laney and an amusing "chronology" of dates mentioned in stf stories by Elmer Perdue. A fan must.

AD INFINITUM, 568 Audubon Avenue, New York 33, N. Y. Editor, Al Weinstein, Published irregularly, 10c per copy.

New York City finally comes up with a halfway interesting fanzine. Contributors include Sam Mason, Tucker, Joe Kennedy, Tom Paley, Jay Chidsey, Henry Elsner, J. R. Gray, Weinstein and the ubiquitous Dunkelberger. It is truly an impressive list, would have been much more so had they been persuaded to come up with more attention-filling items. But it is a start in the right direction.

CHANTICLEER, 25 Poplar, Battle Creek, Michigan. Editor, Walt Liebscher, 15c per copy.

Maybe ye Sarge is just a sucker for a bad pun, but he continues to go all out for this star of the Midwest. The book review section is fully as good as ever, and the editor, under his Ogden Nash Rooster pseudonym has emerged with a riotous couplet in "Women who wobble get men into twobble." He kills us.

FAN, 1305 W. Ingraham, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Walt Daugherty, published monthly. 25c per copy.

Daughtery, aided by his wife, the former Virginia Laney, has come up with an energetic fanzine expressive of his views on almost everything. Three issues forwarded to ye Sarge look excellent. Hope the dogged Daughertys can keep it up, the mags are well worth while.

PANIT STORIES, published by Walt Daugherty, 1305 W. Ingraham, Los Angeles 14, California.

A one-shot full of hilarious caricatures of LASFS greats by Virgil Partch. Lots of laughs.

SHANGRI-L'AFFAIRS, LASFS Clubroom, 637½ South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Gerald Howett.

The always-amusing records of the Los Angeles gang, which is sailing on unserenely under new editorship. Long may it wave! It remains the breeziest and most gossipy of all the 'zines.

THE SCIENTIFICTIONIST, 13618 Cedar Grove, Detroit 5, Michigan. Henry Elsner, editor. Published irregularly. 10c per copy, 3 for 25c.

A new review of stf writings and ideas and one which should prove a valuable addition to the field. However, the printing and cover will have to be perked up considerably to keep subsequent issues from the B-list.

VAMPIRE, 84 Baker Avenue, Dover, N. J. Joe Kennedy, editor. Published five times per year. 10c per issue, three issues 25c.

The Jersey grulzak's fanzine is coming along nicely. Abetted by Chidsey, Jalbert, Moskowitz, de la Ree and others, Joe has a promising fledgling. Very effective cover on ish two.

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[*Turn page*]

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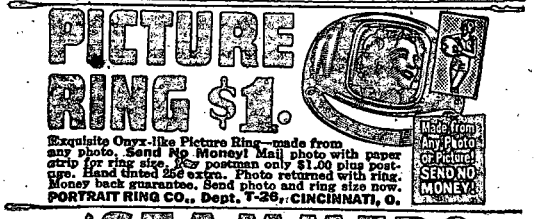
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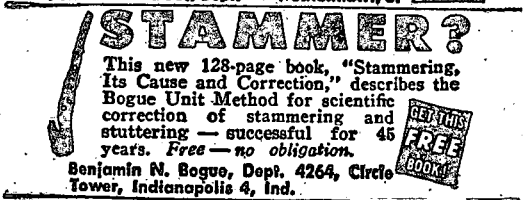
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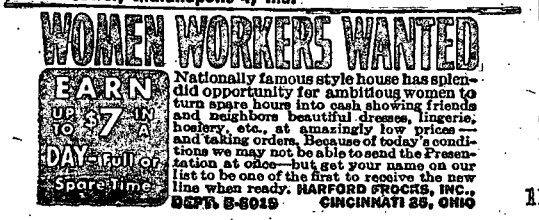
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California. Editor, Sergeant Forrest J. Ackerman. 15c per copy, 7 copies $1.00.

VOM continued to hold its place as best of the letter-box magazines, though a lamentable shortage of copy and cuties make the last issue duller than usual. Ackerman had better do a bit of a face-lifting job on it.

Well, that does it for the A-list. Now, time out. Mournfully we examine a depleted B-list remarkable, as stated already, only for the voluminous contributions of Dunkelberger and Taurasi. Here goes:

FANEWS, 1443 Fourth Avenue South, Fargo, North Dakota. Editor, Walter Dunkelberger. Published irregularly, 2c per copy, 55 for $1.00.

Dunk, with his almost incredible industry is turning this formerly drab if informative little publication into a frequent and big-time fanzine. He can rate a spot on the A-list any time he chooses to slick up its appearance. But at that, getting out the fenews is more important. Go to it, Dunk.

FANTASY-TIMES, Le Havre, France. Sergeant James V. Taurasi, editor. Domestic edition published by Sam Moskowitz, 446 Jeliffe Avenue, Newark, N. J.

Science-fiction fanzine for the men overseas. A simple, single sheet of printing, usually containing a Taurasi screech against RAP.

ONE FINGERS, probably published by Walt Liebscher.

Good silly one-shot stuff.

NIGHTMARE, 460 Orchard Street, Rahway, N. Y. Editor, George Fox. Published monthly. 5c per copy, twelve issues 50c.

Second-rate stuff from the New Jersey mob, including Kennedy and Weinstein.

PHOENIX, 5201 Enright Street, St. Louis 8, Missouri. Van Splawn editor. Published irregularly. 5c per copy.

A new one on this old space dog, and amateurishly gotten up. A prose pastel by Lionel Inman reveals some merit in a gruesome way, but Ray H. Ramsey's poem, "Nyogtha," is unadulterated corn.

THE FANZINE READER'S REVIEW, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California. Editor, Richard M. Sneary. Published irregularly. 5c per copy, 5 copies 25c.

Another neophyte to the ever-changing field of fanzinia. Editor Sneary has conceived the idea of running reprints from earlier 'zines.

Well, that does it. It's pretty slim pickings if you ask the old Sarge. Some of you slans have been loafing, methinks. In fact, methinks in spades. Better get out some more amazines before the good shippe SS swings by on its return journey in a couple of months.

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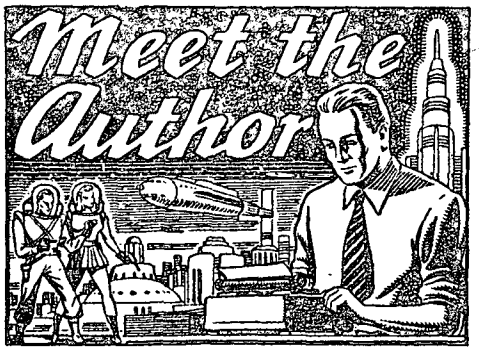


WITH characteristic modesty, author Keith Hammond, whose brilliant novel, VALLEY OF THE FLAME, takes up the bulk of this issue, attempts to state that there is little which is novel in the yarn. We, the editors, do not agree nor, we hope sincerely, will any of you readers.

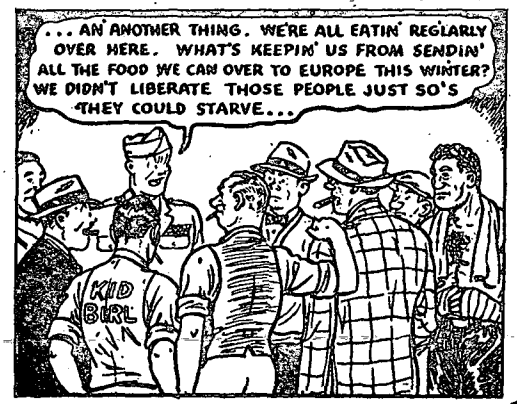
While there is no such thing as a *new* idea, novelty should be ever present in development and presentation of any story to enable it to avoid the damnation of staleness or triteness. Certainly, VALLEY OF THE FLAME contains enough original thought and style to make it a standout in scientification. For fantastic concept and logical explanation—the bases of all good tales, Hammond's story is tops.

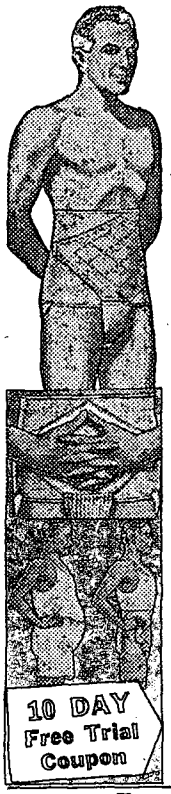
I always feel that a writer's story should be more interesting than his life. However—here's the dope. I'm Eurasian; born in Soerabaya; American citizen now; San Francisco is my headquarters; I'm an antiquarian. Write as a hobby. I own sixteen cats, or, rather, they own me. I'm five feet ten inches, weigh a hundred and sixty odd, dark hair, and a silver plate in my skull under it, relic of some work I did in the Near East about five years ago.

When E. Hoffman Price and I get together we either play bridge or go duck hunting in the tulle marshes toward Sacramento. Or else we

[*Turn page*]

P.F.C. JOE PALOOKA SAYS by Ham Fisher


... AN ANOTHER THING. WE'RE ALL EATIN' REGLARLY OVER HERE. WHAT'S KEEPIN' US FROM SENDIN' ALL THE FOOD WE CAN OVER TO EUROPE THIS WINTER? WE DIDN'T LIBERATE THOSE PEOPLE JUST SO'S THEY COULD STARVE...
KID BERL



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talk writing. As I said, I write as a hobby, and prefer fantasy to any other type. My favorite authors are Ed Hamilton, Murray Leinster, and Henry Kuttner. And that's enough about Keith Hammond, I think.

VALLEY OF THE FLAME follows up an idea that's not too new in science-fiction—an intelligent race evolved from a different species. On earth, as far as we know, we're the dominant species. We've never clashed with another dominant. If we should, some odd things might happen.

Cats and monkeys follow different patterns of logic and motivation. So do ants, of course. For all we know, ants may be the real dominant species here and now, perfectly adjusted to their environment, and not finding it necessary to let "humans" know how the situation stands.

But the thought-processes of ants might be utterly alien and incomprehensible to our minds. The logic of cats would be less so. Imagine a race of humans evolved from the feline stock—and in conflict with simian-evolved humans. Such a conflict would certainly be a basic one—and the idea seemed to me to be worth a story.

My sixteen cats helped me write it, and I hope the readers will feel that the cats and I have done an acceptable job.

—*Keith Hammond.*

TWELVE HOURS TO LIVE

(Concluded from page 88)

suffocating. He could not let her die!

He rushed back to the chest with the warning on it. As his fingers sought the lid, he imagined the sudden swirl of red spores, the agonizing pain he would suffer as the quick growth entered his lungs, covered his body, choking him, piercing him with swift-growing rootlets.

Trembling weakness overcame him. He staggered back, wiping cold perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand.

For a moment he paused, irresolute. Then he pictured Nell, awaking in the coffin-like prison, beating weakly against its walls, gasping for breath, dying. He staggered toward the other chest, hesitated, ran back to the one with the warning words.

With a sudden convulsive effort, he tugged at the heavy lid—.

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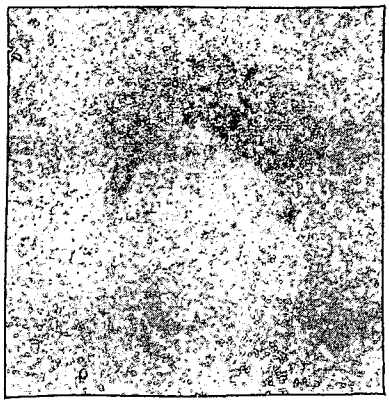

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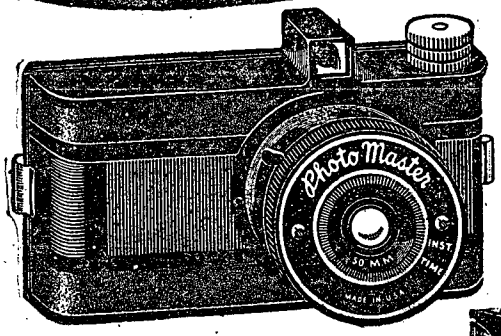

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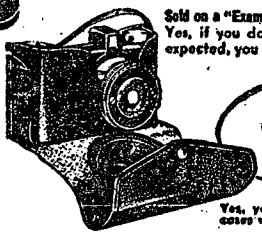

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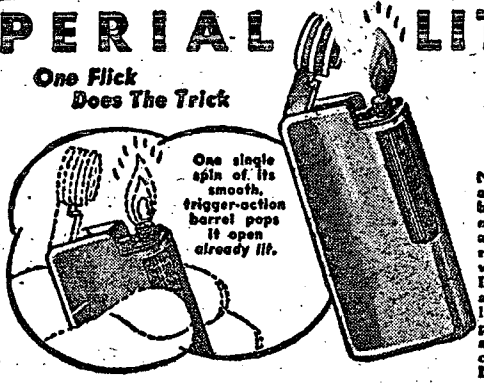

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